

Comic Cures:
The Poetics of Remedy in the Theater of Niccolò Machiavelli and Pietro Aretino

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Italian)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

2022

Date of final oral examination: 9 May 2022

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Acknowledgments

The idea for a project on the poetics of remedy began to percolate more than seven years ago in a seminar on Niccolò Machiavelli's life and works led by Professor Kristin Phillips-Court. It was during this seminar in the fall of 2014 that I came to decide two of the most important things that ultimately shape the future of a PhD student's career: that I would write a dissertation on the Italian Renaissance and that I wanted Professor Phillips-Court to be my advisor. I must therefore begin by thanking her for many years of support and encouragement, and for believing in this dissertation project from the very start.

I would also like thank the members of my committee: Professors Stefania Buccini, Jelena Todorović, and Daniel Kapust. Their questions, comments, and suggestions have guided my work and inspired new avenues of inquiry that have enriched this project. In addition to their intellectual contributions, I have benefitted greatly from their guidance and mentorship, both inside the classroom and beyond.

I am further grateful to the Department of French & Italian for providing me with countless opportunities to expand my professional and intellectual capacities, and I am forever indebted to the professors and staff who have supported me as a scholar and a colleague. Likewise, I would like to acknowledge my comrades in the Graduate Association of French & Italian Students and the Graduate Early Modern Student Society for their intellectual curiosity, tireless work, and sense of community. During my time as a graduate student, I have also had the opportunity to work in various capacities across campus, and so I would like to recognize my wonderful colleagues at the Center for Leadership & Involvement and at the UW Odyssey Project for their encouragement and comradeship these last few years.

I must also thank all the colleagues and friends in French & Italian who laughed and lamented with me over the years: my experience in graduate school has been enriched by your support and friendship. Special thanks go to Samantha Mattocci, Sara Mattavelli, Loren Eadie, and JT Thomas, who laughed with me the loudest. It is also important for me to acknowledge that my graduate career began eleven years ago at the Italian School at Middlebury College. When I arrived on campus, it was then that I knew I had found my people. To Christopher D'Alessandro, Taylor Dimke, and Pamela Cardona, *i miei amici geniali*: I wouldn't be here today if we had not travelled this way together. Thank you for your love, your support, and your truth-talk.

Finally, I will attempt to express my inexpressible gratitude to my family: my parents, Cynthia and Jeffrey, and my sisters and brothers, Abigail, Claire, Andrew, Michael, and Timothy. It is an honor to be your daughter and your sister—thank you for believing in this dream of mine. And lastly, to Vlad Dima: *e come sare' io senza lui corso? / chi m'avria tratto su per la montagna?*

IN MEMORY OF BEVERLY AND JACK, WHO COULDN'T STAY.

Note on Translations

All translations in this dissertation are mine unless otherwise noted. For quotes from the comedies, the act and scene appear in the footnotes. Regarding the translations of the comedies and other primary Italian sources cited within, I have left citations in the text in the original language, providing English translations in the footnotes. When English translations are used that are not mine, I have included the relevant citation to the source of the translation. These translations are primarily aimed at facilitating the reading and discussion of this dissertation by the members of the evaluating oral committee, and thus do not aim at preserving the specific literary, orthographic, dialectal or historical characteristics of the original text.

*E che è ridere se non una corruscazione de la dilettazone de l'anima,
cioè uno lume apparente di fuori secondo sta dentro?*

—Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, III, viii, 11

Introduction

The present study explores the function of sixteenth-century erudite comedy as a figurative antidote to a number of social and political ills that had long plagued Italy by examining the trope of remedy in the theater of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Pietro Aretino (1492-1556). Through an analysis of four comedies by Machiavelli and Aretino respectively, I seek to answer the question of how such maladies (and the power structures that created them) shaped these plays, while also considering, more importantly, how these plays were designed to treat those maladies in return. Building on my close readings of these texts, I employ historicist and cultural-materialist frameworks as well as engage with Cultural Studies and Gender Studies perspectives in order to shed new light on the efforts of these playwrights to promote socio-cultural, economic, and political transformation in early modern Italy.

My reading of these works incorporates a cultural poetics approach to suggest that Machiavelli and Aretino envisioned their comedies as a way of advancing and advocating for their ideological positions—particularly in a political environment in which they both lacked formal or institutional means to do so. Thus, as I will show in the chapters that follow, what differentiates the theatrical comedies of both Machiavelli and Aretino from other writers of this period is that they were not wholly content to identify the problems of their time as they saw them, but were compelled to interrogate social conventions, to castigate vice, and to illuminate a path forward with the mirror and lamp of theater. These plays can therefore be understood as a cohesive ideological project advanced through satire and wit. This vision, in Machiavelli's language, can be understood as a desire to provide a solution, a remedy, a cure to the disease that first must be

identified, as seen in chapter three of *Il Principe*, where Machiavelli develops this strategy with an extended metaphor:

Quello che tutti e' principi savi debbono fare: li quali, non solamente hanno ad avere riguardo alli scandoli presenti, ma a' future, et a quelli con ogni industria ovviare: perché, prevedendosi discosto, facilmente vi si può rimediare; ma, aspettando che ti si appressino, la medicina non è a tempo, perché la malattia è diventata incurabile. Et interviene di questa come dicono e' fisici dello etico, che nel principio del suo male è facile a curare e difficile a conoscere, ma, nel progresso del tempo, non l'avendo in principio conosciuta né medicata, diventa facile a conoscere e difficile a curare. Così interviene nelle cose di stato; perché, conoscendo discosto, il che non è dato se non a uno prudente, e' mali che nascono in quello, si guariscono presto; ma quando, per non li avere conosciuti si lasciono crescere in modo che ognuno li conosco, non vi è più remedio.¹

Across his political works, Machiavelli employs a recurrent metaphor of the human body to signify the health or corruption of the polity.² Importantly, the metaphor here is anchored in discourse about real disease: namely, the diagnosis and cure of consumption (*lo etico*), better known today as tuberculosis. Machiavelli's image is remarkable on several accounts. According to the author's

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. Martina Di Febo (Milan: BUR, 2013), 36. (“[This is what] all wise princes do: these take thought not merely for present discords but also for future ones, and the latter they forestall with every sort of ingenuity; when foreseen far ahead, discords can be easily remedied, but when you wait until they are upon you, the medicine is not in time; they have grown incurable. It is the same as with hectic fever; the physicians say that when the disease begins it is easy to cure but hard to recognize, but in the course of time, when not recognized and treated at the beginning, it becomes easy to recognize and hard to cure. So it is in things of state; on early recognition (which is granted only to a prudent man), the maladies that spring up in a state can be healed speedily; but when, not being recognized, they are allowed to increase in such a way that everybody recognizes them, they can no longer be remedied,” trans. Gilbert, 16-17.) I return to this passage in chapter 1 of the present study.

² The metaphor persists in the proems of all three books of Machiavelli's *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (c. 1513-1519). For a comprehensive study of metaphors of the human body, see Leonard Barkan, *Nature's Work of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), and in particular his chapter on the human body as a metaphor for the church and the state. The recurring presence of the metaphor in Machiavelli's works is likely also a reflection of the renewed cultural interest in the art of pharmacology in sixteenth-century Italy, following the rediscovery of Classical medical texts by Dioscorides and Theophrastus. For more on this history, see Richard Palmer, “Pharmacy in the republic of Venice in the sixteenth century,” in *The Medical Renaissance of the Sixteenth Century*, eds. A. Wear, R. K. French, and I. M. Lonie (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 100-117; as well as Katharine Park, *Doctors and Medicine in Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

description, the disease was known to be easy to cure in its early stages (*facile a curare*) but difficult to diagnose (*difficile a conoscere*). This makes the disease especially dangerous, because tuberculosis was highly contagious and infectious then as it is today.³ Throughout recorded history, tuberculosis has also been known for its steep mortality rate, which makes it an effective choice for Machiavelli's metaphor of remedy: such devastating diseases enter easily into the cultural milieu of a given society, making the reference easily recognizable to contemporaries.⁴ In this particular passage, Machiavelli tightly links the actions of knowing (*conoscere*) and remedying (*curare*), and yet while such insight may identify the cure, the result is not inevitable. Rather, the remedy must be cultivated and then applied, which is a course of action that only *uno prudente* (one of prudence) is able to achieve.

Adopting Machiavelli's metaphor of remedy as a guiding principle, this dissertation takes as a fundamental precept that the Florentine *segretario* and Pietro Aretino, the self-proclaimed *flagello dei principi*, turned to drama as an especially effective form of literature, drawing on certain aspects of the genre that advanced their individual efforts to promote change in their respective contexts. More specifically, I consider how these canonical writers reconfigured the function of comic theater as a remedy or catalyst for transformation as part of their broader intellectual and literary projects. Indeed, these two authors follow precedent in the Classical rhetorical tradition, beginning with the seminal treatises of Aristotle and Horace and continuing

³ Ilaria Barberis, Nicola Luigi Bragazzi, Lucia Galluzzo, and Mariano Martini, "The history of tuberculosis: from the first historical records to the isolation of Koch's bacillus," *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Hygiene* 58.1 (2017): E9.

⁴ Dante also references the disease in *Inferno* XXX, in a simile describing one who was forced to keep his lips parted "like one with consumption does" ("come l'etico fa," *Inf.* XXX, v. 56), underscoring the ready identification of the disease among contemporary audiences (see Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), 895). That Dante uses such a simile in the *Inferno* also emphasizes the hellish nature of tuberculosis, which renders Machiavelli's own use of the metaphor all the more powerful.

on through the contemporary thinkers of the sixteenth century.⁵ On the persuasive power of visual imagery, Horace writes, “What finds entrance through the ear strikes the mind less vividly than what is brought before the trusty eyes of the spectator himself.”⁶ In other words, theatrical spectacle possessed the capability to capture the mind of the audience through the eyes, essentially rendering the spectator as co-creators of meaning.⁷ In the words of Mario Baratto, “il primo godimento del pubblico è *contemplare*, guardare: sicché lo *spettatore*, nel senso letterale ed etimologico del termine, nasce con la commedia e in generale col teatro del Cinquecento” (original emphases).⁸ Moreover, as Pamela Smith, Tianna Helena Uchacz, Sophie Pitman, Tillman Taape, and Colin Debuiche have demonstrated, the art of spectacle had long been utilized by potentates (and theorized by the political thinkers who studied them) who understood that “the representation of power” was also an integral part of the “business of rule”: a world in which “visual representations could be effective in transforming individuals’ wills.”⁹ Indeed, Renaissance culture was dominated by visual art—painting, sculpture, and various types of spectacles and performances—that sought to persuade on behalf of the artist (and patron). Moreover, while humanism and humanistic culture

⁵ For relevant sixteenth century criticism, see, for example, Giangiorgio Trissino, *Poetica*, first published in 1529, though the author had evidently begun this work sometime prior to 1515, and which largely rehearses Aristotle’s arguments in the *Poetics*; in particular, Division I. 1, “Since the greater part of men are of such a nature that they unwillingly lend their ears to instruction and listen with delight to stories and pleasant things, I judge those ancient poets should be greatly praised who considering delight and general usefulness have mingled with fables and stories of battle the most excellent instructions on human life, and in that way have made them pleasing to the people, whereas if these teachings had been unadorned they would perhaps have pleased little,” and also VI. 120-1 and 127-8, in Allan H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (New York: American Book Company, 1940), 212-232.

⁶ Horace, *Ars poetica* 178; see Gilbert, *Literary Criticism*, 133.

⁷ Pamela Smith, Tianna Helena Uchacz, Sophie Pitman, Tillman Taape, and Colin Debuiche, “The Matter of Ephemeral Art: Craft, Spectacle, and Power in Early Modern Europe,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 72 (2020), 82.

⁸ Mario Baratto, *La commedia del Cinquecento: aspetti e problemi* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1977), 61-2. (“The first pleasure of the audience is [the act of] *contemplating*, watching: thus, the *spectator*, in the literal and etymological sense of the term, is born with the advent of comic theater and in general with the theatre of the sixteenth century.”)

⁹ Smith et al., “Craft, Spectacle, and Power,” 84.

saw a shift toward the primacy of the individual in philosophy and ideology, visual cultures in Renaissance Italy remained largely focused on collective experience. Great works of art, even when commissioned by an individual, were often displayed in public spaces to serve as tools of political propaganda, as was the case in much of the artistic patronage commissioned by the Medici family in Florence.¹⁰

The origins of the present inquiry are therefore rooted in the following fundamental question: what drew Machiavelli and Aretino, two of the most well-known and prolific authors of the early sixteenth century, to produce works of theatrical comedy? At this moment in history, the genre itself was only just emerging, borne out of a revival of interest in classical texts that gave rise to the era known as the Renaissance.¹¹ Indeed, the rebirth of the theater in early modern Italy, following the rediscovery of Greco-Roman drama in the late fifteenth century, is an important backdrop to any study of Cinquecento comedy.¹² There exists, of course, a distinct history of performance on the Italian peninsula prior to this revival; dating from the Medieval period onward, documentation survives of forms such as the *sacre rappresentazioni* (religious plays that represented Biblical episodes or Christ's Passion), alongside episodes of *cantastorie* (storytellers) who set up in the public squares to perform popular tales—not to mention the spectacle and revelry

¹⁰ An illuminating study on patronage as political power is Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹¹ On the relationship between Renaissance authors and the authorities of the Greco-Roman classical tradition, see David Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature: Versions of the Source* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

¹² There are many excellent studies that provide an in-depth examination of this early period in the history of Italian theater. On the genre of theatrical comedy, see Marvin T. Herrick, *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1960) and his *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964); Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, *The Birth of Modern Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Giulio Ferroni, *"Mutazione" e "riscontro" nel teatro di Machiavelli e altri saggi sulla commedia del Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1972); as well as the previously-mentioned Baratto, *La commedia del Cinquecento* (1977).

enjoyed during the annual carnival season.¹³ In its initial iterations, therefore, the ‘new’ humanist theater could be understood in part as an evolution of these earlier forms. It combined several phenomena to make it a wholly new and unique Italian creation: by fusing elements of these popular performances with language and plotlines that can be traced to the novella tradition (namely Boccaccian in origin), and by combining and reinventing some the structural components and subject matter found in the Roman plays of Plautus and Terence, we arrive the very origins of modern European theater.¹⁴ From these roots, Italian comedy in particular was the first genre to develop, due largely to the playwrights’ access to those Roman comedies and linked with the typical comic nature of the Italian novella tradition.¹⁵

¹³ The *sacre rappresentazioni* were the first Italian spectacles to produce a written play text that accompanied an established praxis of performance, and only a few extant literary texts remain. Of these, Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione quando la Nostra Donna Vergine Maria fu annunziata* (1469) is one of the most emblematic of the genre. On this play and its relationship to visual art, see Kristin Phillips-Court, “Delighting the spirit: Belcari’s *Rappresentazione quando la Nostra Donna Vergine Maria fu annunziata dall’Angelo Gabriello* (1469),” in *The Perfect Genre: Drama and Painting in Renaissance Italy* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 23-56. For a wide-ranging introduction to Renaissance spectacle, see also Giovanni Attolini, *Teatro e spettacolo nel Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1988).

¹⁴ Titus Maccius Plautus (254-184 BCE) was a Roman playwright from the Old Latin period who adapted comedies from Greek models for a more contemporary Roman audience. He wrote 130 plays, though only twenty survive, and was known for his colloquial style and frequent use of proverbs, puns, and word play. Nicolas of Cusa’s 1429 rediscovery of twelve of Plautus’ comedies likely reinvigorated interest in his work. Publius Terentius Afer (185-159 BCE) was a playwright during the Roman Republic. He too adapted earlier Greek plays, writing a total of six, all of which survive. His style and language imitate a simple, conversational Latin. His play *Andria* was performed in Florence in 1476, perhaps the earliest known performance of these Latin comedies. Between 1506 and 1507, the plays of Plautus and Terence were performed over twenty times in Italy. Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 24-26; Kristin Phillips-Court, *The Perfect Genre*, 17n29.

¹⁵ On the medieval roots of Italian early modern drama, see Nino Borsellino, *Rozzi e Intronati: esperienze e forme di teatro del Decameron al Candelaio* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974). Richard Andrews makes a clear case for the logical precedence of comedy in the history of performance (arguing that this genre was simply more accessible than other classical models of theater); performances of both tragedy and pastoral would not be seen until the 1540s; see Richard Andrews, “Erudite Comedy,” in *A History of Italian Theatre*, eds. J. Farrell and P. Pappa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 41-43. On the origins and early history of Italian theater, see Joseph Farrell and Paolo Pappa, eds., *A History of Italian Theatre* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9-57.

The first Italian comedies, which date from as early as the first decades of the sixteenth century, became known as *commedia erudita*, or learned comedy (also called ‘regular comedy’), a categorization defined by its conformity to formats derived from Plautus and Terence.¹⁶ The first theatrical performances were imitations of these classical plays, simple *mise-en-scènes*, often recited in Latin by aristocratic schoolboys.¹⁷ Before long, humanist authors attempted their own contemporary vernacular adaptations, which would earn the designation ‘*erudita*’ precisely because they imitated Latin models. This appropriation of the Roman models of theater falls in line with the Renaissance-era tradition of reviving, imitating, and perhaps improving upon the classical forms. Although much of Roman theater was in part an act of adaptation of even-earlier Greek models, the Latin sources proved more accessible to Renaissance writers than their Greek counterparts (both in language and themes). In particular, the comedies of Plautus and Terence, mentioned above, which were already being studied in schools as early as the late fifteenth century, were especially attractive sources of inspiration for writers in this new genre, given their colloquial style and language, as well as their relatable and easily adaptable plots.¹⁸ It is generally acknowledged that the first productions of *commedia erudita* took place in Ferrara at the Este

¹⁶ The format of the typical *commedia erudita* dictated a five-act structure, with unities of time, place, and action. Staging would therefore be limited to a single, immovable urban street setting, and the action of the plot would generally take place within a twenty-four-hour period. Furthermore, the characters of the *commedia erudita* belonged exclusively to the middle and lower classes of urban society (also a common feature in the Italian novella), as opposed to the noble and ruling classes that would feature in the later Italian tragedies.

¹⁷ On the Latin humanist comedies (in prose and in verse), see Herrick, *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance*, 15-25; on the early performance history of the Latin texts at the Ferrarese court, see Elvira Garbero-Zorzi and Daniele Seragnoli, “Lo studio e lo spettacolo in Ferrara estense,” in Jadranka Bentini, ed., *Gli Este a Ferrara: una corte nel Rinascimento* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2004), 307-329.

¹⁸ Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 24-30; Herrick, *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance*, 60-111. Louise George Clubb’s concept of the “theatregram” is also useful here: these are plots and character types that could be combined in an endless number of configurations in the creation of a dramatic work, “based on the principle of contamination of sources, genres, and accumulated stage-structures.” See Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare’s Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 1-26, cit. 5.

court, with Ludovico Ariosto's *La cassaria* (written in 1507 and first performed in 1508) and *I suppositi* (1509); Bibbiena (born Bernardo Dovizi) would soon follow suit with *La Calandria*, which was performed at the Urbino court in 1513.¹⁹ Theatrical productions transpired as collective experiences, where spectators would gather in one place to witness together the performed event. Sometimes these performances took place in a public space, like that of the piazza, as documented by the earliest proto-dramatic activities, often part of secular or religious celebrations.²⁰ Later, theatrical productions would move to a more private locale, which was associated with the increase in the number of privately commissioned plays, often associated to a court environment, as was the case with the early theatre of Ariosto in Ferrara. Despite these distinctions, all theatrical pieces require a public, an audience to behold the action—which makes it distinct from all other types of literature, raising important questions about the significance and value of theatre's performative nature.

I offer this literary history primarily to situate Machiavelli and Aretino within the larger tradition of the new modern Italian theater. Machiavelli began writing his own original comedies only ten years (c. 1518) after Ariosto's first comedies, and so the emergent genre was still in its earliest phase. Aretino's plays would soon follow, as he composed his first comedy in 1525. By the time they turned their attention to the theater, both authors were well practiced in other genres.

¹⁹ Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 34-39. For modern editions of these play texts, see Ludovico Ariosto, *Commedie: La cassaria, I suppositi*, ed. Luigina Stefani (Milan: Mursia, 1997) and 'Bibbiena' (Bernardo Dovizi), *La Calandria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967). Herrick, however, argues that the first "learned comedies" were the work of Iacopo Nardi (*Comedia di amicitia*, c. 1497) and Publio Filippo Mantovano (*Formicone*, 1503), though he acknowledges that Ariosto is widely considered "the father of the *commedia erudita*." See Herrick, *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance*, 65-67, cit. 67.

²⁰ The literature on the early religious theater tradition is vast. Several critical studies that have helped establish the critical literary parameters of the genre known as the *sacre rappresentazioni* are Nerida Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno: Plays in Churches in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, vol. II (Florence, Olschki, 1996); Marzia Pieri, "Lo spettacolo sacro," in *La nascita del teatro moderno in Italia tra XV e XVI secolo* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1989), 38-53; Mario Martelli, *Letteratura Fiorentina del Quattrocento: il filtro degli anni Sessanta* (Florence: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 1996).

Machiavelli was already well-known for his political works, stemming from his tumultuous political career in Florence and subsequent exile. Aretino, too, had made a name for himself upon arriving in Rome sometime around 1517 by composing popular satirical poetry that criticized everyone from fellow courtiers to the Pope himself. What, then, drew Machiavelli and Aretino to comic theater? An argument could be made that these two self-styled men of letters may have simply been interested in experimenting with the new, up-and-coming genre of vernacular comedy.²¹ This dissertation aims to move past such a simplification and posits instead a theory that both men, for similar yet distinct intents and purposes, found the genre of theatrical comedy to be the ideal vehicle through which to express their ideas, communicate with key publics, and perhaps even provide a solution—or a remedy, as it were—to the issues they treat in their works.

In this study, I concentrate my analyses on variations of the *rimedio* trope in four comedies by these two playwrights in chronological order. Machiavelli's first original comedy, the wildly popular *Mandragola*, was composed sometime around the year 1518. Following the success of *Mandragola*, Machiavelli was commissioned by a friend to compose a new comedy in 1525, which became a clever adaptation of Plautus's *Casina* that Machiavelli entitled *Clizia*. He died in 1527 at the age of fifty-eight, making that play his final work of theater. Aretino, too, maintained a strong interest in drama throughout his career, composing five regular comedies and one tragedy before his death in 1556 at age sixty-four. For the purposes of the present investigation, I have chosen to focus on Aretino's two earliest comedies, *La Cortigiana* (1525, 1534) and *Il Marescalco*

²¹ On Machiavelli as man of letters, see Carlo Dionisotti's chapter, "Machiavelli letterato," in *Machiavellerie* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 103-143; an English translation by Olivia Holmes is also included in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, eds. Albert R. Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 18-51; see also John Bernard, "Writing and the Paradox of the Self: Machiavelli's Literary Vocation," *Renaissance Quarterly* 59.1 (2006): 59-89. On Aretino's efforts to craft a literary persona, see Raymond Waddington, *Aretino's Satyr: Sexuality, Satire, and Self-Projection in Sixteenth-Century Literature and Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), in particular 33-55.

(1527, 1533), which the author composed in the period prior to his arrival in Venice in 1528, where he remained until his death. These texts also arise within the larger historical context of sixteenth-century Italy, between the fall of the Florentine republic in 1512 and the Sack of Rome 1527, and so they also reflect the authors' attempts to make sense of these cataclysmic events and their place within this history.

In the chapters that follow, it will be argued that these four comedies provide an emblematic textual example of the power of comedy as a literary genre, employed by these two authors as a means of interrogating the world around them and advocating for new ways forward. Yet both Machiavelli and Aretino found themselves in a unique position outside the traditional seats of power, though they were often adjacent to or in contact with many of the most important rulers and leaders of their time. Machiavelli, who belonged to the generation that preceded Aretino's, was once a highly regarded statesman in the Florentine government until he was exiled by the return of the Medici family.²² It was at this time that Machiavelli made a significant turn towards the theater following his banishment from public life in 1513.²³ At the onset of his career, Aretino

²² I discuss Machiavelli's personal history in greater detail in chapters 1 and 2 of the present study. Several excellent biographical studies that have informed my work on the Florentine writer are the following: Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Machiavelli* (Rome: Angelo Belardetti Editore, 1954), trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); Niccolò Capponi, *An Unlikely Prince: The Life and Times of Machiavelli* (Boston: Da Capo, 2010); and Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: A Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). More recently, Josephine Jungić revisited Machiavelli's long friendship with Giuliano de' Medici to argue for a reevaluation of the latter as a popular Florentine leader whom Machiavelli had hoped would become the new ruler of the republican city; see Josephine Jungić, *Giuliano de' Medici: Machiavelli's Prince in Life and Art*, ed. Anne Leader (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018).

²³ Sometime between 1517 and 1520, Machiavelli completed a vernacular translation of Terence's comedy, *Andria*. The work has not received much critical attention to date, perhaps due to its lack of originality, though the play does evidence Machiavelli's interest in the emerging theater of the sixteenth century. For an overview on Machiavelli's interest in comedy (and on his lesser-known theatrical works), see James B. Atkinson, "An Essay on Machiavelli and Comedy," in *The Comedies of Machiavelli*, ed. and trans., David Sices and James B. Atkinson (Hanover: The University Press of New England, 1985), 1-34. Expanding on Machiavelli's interest in literature, Martinez interrogates the enigma of Machiavelli's self-description, in a 1525 letter to Francesco Guicciardini, as "historico, comico et tragico." Machiavelli did not write any work of tragedy, as far as we know, and thus Martinez asserts that the author was acknowledging the historical

too moved in circles closest to power—in this case, in Medicean Rome—before the acerbic force of his pen led to too many powerful enemies.²⁴ Someone, allegedly a member of the Roman Curia, ordered Aretino's assassination and the writer barely escaped the city with his life, never to return again. For both men, the realities of exile and unstable patronage influenced their writing and shaped their attitudes towards the power of the theater to convey their ideas, frustrations, and visions for the future.

Beyond the historical facts of their lives, these men also shared a similar view of their own literary success. Neither felt accepted in traditional literary circles, even to the point of deliberate exclusion. An oft-cited letter written by Machiavelli to his friend Ludovico Alamanni illuminates the author's feelings of exclusion. He writes: "Io ho letto a questi dì *Orlando furioso* dello Ariosto, et veramente il poema è bello tutto [...] Se si truova costí, raccomandatemi a lui, et ditegli che io mi dolgo solo che, havendo ricordato tanti poeti, che m'habbi lasciato indietro come un cazzo."²⁵ Here Machiavelli refers to the final canto of Ariosto's epic poem in which the latter lists many important *litterati* of the day, an inventory from which the former's name was omitted. As Ascoli and Kahn have noted, Machiavelli's bitter words suggest to us that the author believed himself to

resonances of his comic works, which both deal with the tragedy of Italy's contemporary history. It is Machiavelli's literary genius that emerges in this blending of history, comedy, and tragedy. See Ronald Martinez, "Tragic Machiavelli," in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works*, ed. Vickie B. Sullivan (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 102-119; 214-224.

²⁴ Likewise, Aretino's biography is more fully explored in chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation. Paul Larivaille's work is considered foundational in the study of his life and work; see Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980) and *Pietro Aretino* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1997). Other important biographical and critical works on the *poligrafo* include James Cleugh, *The Divine Aretino* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966); Christopher Cairns, *Pietro Aretino and the Republic of Venice: Researches on Aretino and his Circle in Venice, 1527-1556* (Florence: Olschki, 1985); and Marga Cottino-Jones, *Introduzione a Pietro Aretino* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1993).

²⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, n. 170, in *Lettere*, ed. Franco Gaeta (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961), 383. ("I recently read Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, and truly the whole poem is beautiful [...] If you happen to see him, give him my regards, and tell him that I am only sorry that, having memorialized so many poets, he left me out like a prick," my translation.) The letter is briefly mentioned in chapters 1 and 2 as well.

be a poet worthy of mention among the important writers of this period and that, having been overlooked by Ariosto, Machiavelli experienced a very real, material effect of expulsion from the dominant literary circles of his time.²⁶ Likewise, Aretino, too, felt that despite his best efforts, both in terms of literary production and in his cultivation of artistic patrons and friends, he was never truly considered amongst the cultural giants of the period. Though he is widely considered the first Renaissance *poligrafo*, he was never quite appreciated as a Renaissance *virtuoso* and today he is predominantly remembered for his penchant for stirring up controversy rather than for any particular demonstration of literary brilliance. While scholars such as Raymond Waddington and Marco Faini, among others, have done significant work to illuminate Aretino's ingenuity and to reposition his contributions to the literary culture of Renaissance Italy, Aretino is still often relegated to the margins of critical attention.

The result of these historical and cultural circumstances was that both Machiavelli and Aretino found themselves on the outside of the institutional power structures—in government, in the case of Machiavelli, and at court, for Aretino—that defined and determined life in sixteenth-century Italy. Such a position denied them the concrete authority that would have been required to enact the change that they envisioned in order to reconfigure the world according to their values. Both authors also understood the power of the written word, so integral to humanistic culture in the Renaissance, and the ways in which literature itself possessed a certain ability to shape minds and create new worlds, just as Dante Alighieri had accomplished two hundred years earlier in the *Divina Commedia*.²⁷ Following in this tradition, Machiavelli and Aretino sought to participate fully

²⁶ Ascoli and Kahn, *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, 1-15, in particular 1-4.

²⁷ In the expository epistle (written in Latin) to Can Grande della Scala in which Dante provides exegesis on the form, function, and aims of his *Divina Commedia*, the poet explains that when ethics dominates a work of literature, said work is “devised not for the sake of speculation but of possible action [...] for if in any place or passage the method of discussion is that of speculative thought, it is not for the sake of speculative thought but for the sake of practical activity.” Dante Alighieri, *Epistola 13* (“Letter to

among the influential ranks of humanist culture by way of the written word, in the hopes of accessing and wielding the power of literature when other forms of influence may have been denied to them. The genre of comedy, defined by its narrative trajectory of moving chaos to order, was fertile ground for their exploration of possible futures. The restoration of order was often brought about by marriages and new alliances, when all of the problems raised in the plot would be resolved in by the happy ending. Yet comic characters often lie, cheat, coerce, and steal, and thus comedy also provided Machiavelli and Aretino the opportunity to measure the depth of humanity's vices as well as to extol its virtues.

My approach is frequently *intergeneric* as well: alongside the four comedies that represent the main focus of my analysis and arguments, I also turn to other relevant literary works by these two authors, such as Machiavelli's *Principe* and *Discorsi*, as well as Aretino's early pasquinade production and his later dialogues. I am likewise interested in the intertextuality present within these plays and have incorporated analyses that encompass other pertinent texts from the Italian literary tradition, including the masterpieces of Dante and Boccaccio alongside more contemporary fifteenth- and sixteenth-century texts. Finally, the historical and geographical contexts of Machiavelli and Aretino's works are critical to my reading of these plays, which aims to uncover within them "the textuality of history and the historicity of texts."²⁸ Thus as part of my

Cangrande della Scala") in Gilbert, *Literary Criticism*, 203. It should be noted that the debate over the authenticity of this letter, traditionally ascribed to the poet, continues today. For an overview of the principal arguments, see Carlo Ginzburg, "Dante's *Epistle to Cangrande* and its Two Authors," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 139 (2006): 195-216. For an argument in favor of Dante's authorship, see Robert Hollander, *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). An important dissenting voice is Zgymunt G. Barański, "Comedía: Notes on Dante, the *Epistle to Cangrande*, and Medieval Comedy," *Lectura Dantis* 8 (1991): 26-55.

²⁸ Here I quote Louis R. Montrose, whose essay "Professing the Renaissance: the Poetics and the Politics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15-36, cit. 20, provides a critical foundation for my cultural materialist approach.

discussion of Machiavelli and Aretino's comedies, I consider historical accounts of the socio-cultural and political realities of this period, beginning with the era of Laurentian Florence into which Machiavelli was born and through the 1530s when Aretino finally established himself in the Republic of Venice after having fled Medicean Rome.

The two authors upon whom I focus my attention in this dissertation continue to receive sustained attention by the critical scholarship, not only among scholars of Italian literature but in other critical traditions as well.²⁹ Recent studies have also revisited Italian comic theater in order to further parse its role and function in Renaissance culture. I refer to scholars such as Ronald Martinez, Laura Giannetti, Albert Ascoli, Susan Gaylard, Yael Manes, and Raymond Waddington, to name a few, who have published invaluable studies of the playwrights and works included in the present study.³⁰ This dissertation contributes to and productively departs from recent work on these authors and their comedies, and on the genre of Cinquecento comedy in general, by focusing on the poetics of this literary form through the varied, yet central trope of remedy in Machiavelli and Aretino's comedies.

²⁹ The field of political science, for example, continues to find Machiavelli a compelling study for understanding the political climate of Renaissance Italy (as well as that of our own time). Scholars whose insights have influenced my thinking include Daniel Kapust, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, Catherine Zuckert, Michelle T. Clarke, and Brandon Turner, and their works are cited throughout this dissertation. Additionally, scholars in the fields of history, art history, cultural studies, and theater studies have explored the many facets of Italian Renaissance drama as part of their critical investigations.

³⁰ In addition to this corpus of recent scholarship, my dissertation also relies on the foundational work by Nino Borsellino, Giulio Ferroni, Mario Baratto, Mario Martelli, Giuliano Innamorati, Richard Andrews, and Louise George Clubb, among many others cited in the following chapters. Several collected volumes on Machiavelli's literary works have also contributed to the conversation: see in particular Vickie Sullivan, ed., *The Comedy and Tragedy of Niccolò Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Ascoli and Kahn, *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature* (1993). On Aretino's literary legacy, the edited volume in honor of the *cinquecentenario* of his birth is an important source; see Centro Pio Rajna, *Pietro Aretino nel cinquecentenario della nascita: Atti del convegno di Roma-Viterbo-Arezzo (28 settembre-1 ottobre 1992), Toronto (23-24 ottobre 1992), Los Angeles (27-29 ottobre 1992), vols. 1- 2* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1995).

The starting point for the discussion of remedy and cure in the present study is Machiavelli's 1518 *Mandragola*, in which one key word, *rimedio* (remedy), emerges as a polyvalent concept that involves a variety of nuances in the plot. The play revolves around an illusory remedy, the *mandragola* (mandrake root), whose paradoxical power signals both curative and toxic properties. Beyond the mandrake's function as *pharmakon*—a dual compound that combines remedy and poison—*Mandragola* also uses *rimedio* as a comprehensive term to encompass the clever and often devious schemes that drive the plot to conquer the mind and body of the virtuous Lucrezia. Lucrezia's presumed infertility, the focal point of the play's comic cures, functions as both an obstacle to and a vehicle for the desires of others. Lucrezia's childlessness denies her husband, Messer Nicia Calfucci, an heir to his name, which would increase his influence and wealth. Lucrezia's predicament affords the young, smitten Callimaco Guadagni the means by which to manipulate others in order to gain access to her bed.³¹ The parasite Ligurio orchestrates evolving schemes with aplomb, discerning that if all goes well, he can ensure his own benefit through the gratitude of everyone involved. A *rimedio*, a potion of mandrake, thus promises to remove obstacles to heredity, sexual fulfillment, and material profit. As Ligurio's words illustrate in II.6, with every new problem that arises in the execution of their plan vanquish Lucrezia's virtue by exploiting her husband, there is always a solution:

NICIA:	Una fatica ci resta, e d'importanza.
CALLIMACO:	Quale?
NICIA:	Farne contenta mogliama, a che io non credo ch'ella si disponga mai.

³¹ Careful readers have observed that Callimaco's last name means 'profit' (*guadagno*), which links the character to Machiavelli's analyses of the dangers of excessive private gains. For Machiavelli, "gli appetiti umani" are "insaziabili" ('human appetites are insatiable') and lead to the corruption of the civic good. See the proem to book 2 in Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, in *Opere*, vol. 1, ed. Rinaldo Rinaldi (Turin: UTET, 1999, 2006), 729. See also Ronald Martinez, "The Pharmacy of Machiavelli: Roman Lucretia in *Mandragola*," *Renaissance Drama* 14.1 (1983): 32-33.

- CALLIMACO: Voi dite el vero. Ma io non vorrei innanzi
essere marito, se io non la disponessi a fare
a mio modo.
- LIGURIO: Io ho pensato el rimedio.
- NICIA: Come?
- LIGURIO: Per via del confessore.
- CALLIMACO: Chi disporrà el confessore, tu?
- LIGURIO: Io, e danari, la cattività nostra, loro.
- NICIA: Io dubito, non che altro, che per mio detto la
non voglia ire a parlare al confessore.
- LIGURIO: Ed anche a cotesto è rimedio.³²

This exchange demonstrates Ligurio's resourcefulness, which allows him to manipulate the unfolding events with evermore ingenious 'remedies' that implicate the characters in morally questionable ways. The ingenuity of Machiavelli's *Mandragola* also lies in how these solutions extend beyond the textual and scenic spaces to reach into contemporary life, revealing social, cultural, and political forces that shaped sixteenth-century Italy. Here, an investigation of remedy's nuances allows us to understand how linked ideas of sickness and health, corruption and cure, reflected dominant systems of belief and propelled politics.

³² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, ed. Gian Mario Anselmi (Milan: Mursia, 1984), II.6. ("Nicia: One difficulty is left, and it's important. / Callimaco: What is it? / Nicia: To get my wife to consent, for I don't believe she'll ever make up her mind to it. / Callimaco: You're right. But I hope I shall never be a husband if I can't get my wife to do what I want. / Ligurio: I've thought of a [remedy]. / Nicia: What is it? / Ligurio: Through her confessor. / Callimaco: Who'll get the confessor to do it? / Ligurio: You, I, money, our rascality, theirs. / Nicia: If nothing more, I'm afraid that for anything I say she won't be willing to talk with her confessor. / Ligurio: And there's a [remedy] for that too," trans. Allan Gilbert, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, vol. II (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), 792. I have modified Gilbert's translation here, indicated in brackets, to offer a more literal meaning for the term *rimedio*, which he renders as "scheme."

Mandragola is the focus of Chapter 1, which begins with an overview of the central *pharmakon* of the comedy: the mandrake, or *mandragola*, from which the play takes its title. A key feature of the *mandragola* is its paradoxical nature: in the comedy (as in nature), the mandrake root contains both toxic and curative properties that can help or harm based on its application. The plot turns on the desperate desires of the characters: a couple's longing for children, a young man's burning lust for another's wife, the greed of a parasite and of a church friar. A potion of mandrake promises to fulfill all their wishes, but the implications of its dual complexion—a stand-in figure destined to die must first absorb the cure's toxicity—ultimately reveals the underlying immorality and self-interest of those who aim to use it. The examination of the *mandragola* remedy also includes a discussion of the historical moment, including revisiting Machiavelli's exile and the context for his drafting of *Mandragola*, whose prologue alludes to the difficult period (“el suo tristo tempo”) the author endured following his exile from Florence.³³ In the final pages of the chapter, the analytical focus turns to Lucrezia, the female protagonist around whom the comedy's remedies revolve. Scholars have long debated her significance in the comedy, noting the connection between Machiavelli's character and the Roman noblewoman, Lucretia, who features in the founding mythology of Livy's *Ab urbe condita* (*History of Rome*). Unlike in Livy's tale, Machiavelli's Lucrezia does not commit suicide—instead, she assumes the foresight and astuteness that others fail to demonstrate by adopting the mandrake potion for her own purposes. Through her triumph, Machiavelli reclaims the nobility, agency, and revolutionary power of Lucrezia's Roman antecedent to propose new possibilities for an ailing body politic.

Machiavelli's interest in theater aligns with his interest in the power of spectacle, and so Machiavelli's *Clizia* (1525), the focus of chapter 2, considers its utility both within the play and in

³³ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, prologue. Gilbert translates this as “his wretched life” (778).

the playwright's own reality. In the comedy, spectacle functions as a tool of empowerment and as a catalyst for personal transformation when the fraught Sofronia decides to harness the potential of shame in order to protect her family. Her husband, Nicomaco, has fallen in love with their young charge, the eponymous Clizia, and threatens the girl's honor and the family's good name with his scandalous behavior. When Sofronia orchestrates a scheme to ridicule her husband for his inappropriate desires, she uses laughter as a remedy to humiliate Nicomaco into mending his ways. The ensuing spectacle of public derision provokes a moral catharsis through which shame purges Nicomaco of his lustful folly. At the play's conclusion he emerges renewed, and the social order is thus restored. As careful readers have noted, the *senex amans* Nicomaco also functions as a nominal stand-in for the playwright, whose own inappropriate love affair was the subject of much gossip within Machiavelli's social circles. In this light, *Clizia* becomes a staging of Machiavelli's own failings—and subsequent rehabilitation—as part of his attempt to confront the challenges and disappointments of his later years. Originally conceived for a private performance among his friends, the comedy reconfigures the teleology of spectacle, moving beyond its use as a political and social remedy to an interpersonal one as well.

In chapter 3, the analytic focus shifts to Pietro Aretino and Medicean Rome, beginning with his anti-court satire, *La Cortigiana*. Though the revised version of the comedy, published in Venice in 1534, is better known to readers today, I prioritize the text of the earlier 1525 edition, arguing that the first draft offers a richer portrayal (and sharper critique) of life at the papal court before the 1527 Sack of Rome. As the differences in the two playtexts illustrate, Aretino composed the first version with a specific Roman audience in mind, and thus the 1525 *Cortigiana*, full of topical allusions and inside jokes, represents a slice of court life in a way that its subsequent edition could never achieve from a distance of both space and time. The chapter starts with an overview

of Aretino's early years as a pasquinate poet, lampooning those in power through the clever and biting sonnets that paved the way for his theatrical endeavors. Then, through a close reading of several key scenes—including the provocative 1525 prologue which emphasizes the play's purgative and restorative functions—I posit that the comedy invites the audience, spectators of the Roman court, to recognize themselves on stage in Aretino's portrayal of their vice and folly. Through Aretino's satire—his remedy for the corruption and iniquity he witnessed in these early years—the comedy aims to inspire reform in the deeply corrupted Roman court, an argument which bears out across the action of the play and its wily cast of Roman courtiers, parasites, and naïve fools.

The fourth and final chapter engages with Aretino's second comedy, *Marescalco* (1533), a comedy about a stablemaster's defiance at the Mantuan court. In the opening scene of the play, the titular Marescalco learns that the Duke of Mantua plans to give him a wife by day's end, a distressing prospect for the committed bachelor. He spends the entire play looking for a way out of the arranged marriage, encountering various members of the court who take turns teasing and cajoling him, offering advice about married life, or warning him not to incur the wrath of the Duke, whose whims are to be obeyed at all costs. The Marescalco remains steadfast in his resistance to this marriage plot, and so this chapter focuses on the ways in which the comedy explores questions of power and dissent through the Marescalco's refusal to accept his role within the patriarchal order of Renaissance society. Given their focus on sex, love, and marriage, sixteenth-century comic plots reveal to us a great deal about the gender politics of early modern Italian culture, and so the discussion begins with a consideration of these themes and how several humanist works in other genres treated similar topics. I then turn my attention more fully to the comedy through an analysis of four principal characters, including the Marescalco himself, and in particular the

speeches they give for or against the institution of marriage. In *Il Marescalco*, resistance is the remedy, if not the cure, and so in Aretino's theater of dissent, the stage provides a crucial space for interrogating and subverting dynamics of authority in sixteenth-century Italian society.

Thus, for Niccolò Machiavelli and Pietro Aretino, the genre of comic theater represented an ideal medium for questioning the structures of power in the tumultuous world of early modern Italy and for recasting their own roles within them. Through their interrogations, the stage became a site of transformation and their audiences a receptive vehicle for their innovative visions. Through an examination of the relationship between comedy and remedy, this study's ultimate aim is to bring to light new perspectives on the role and function of theater in the Italian Renaissance, as envisioned by these two canonical authors to whom the power of a collective gaze held the promise of a different, perhaps brighter future, one full of possibilities and transformative writing.

Chapter One:
The Politics of Remedy in Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (1518)

*The mandrakes give forth fragrance,
 and over our doors are all choice fruits,
 new as well as old,
 which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.*
 —Song of Solomon, 7:13

In Niccolò Machiavelli's well-known political treatise, *Il Principe* (c. 1513), he writes about the simple-minded nature of men, who succumb to their present needs and let themselves be deceived by others:

Sono tanto semplici gli uomini, e tanto ubbidiscono alle necessità presenti, che colui che inganna troverà sempre chi si lascerà ingannare.¹

Machiavelli's advice for the ruler is to know how to 'simulate' and 'dissimulate' —“essere gran simulatore e dissimulatore” —so in order to manipulate less intelligent men to his advantage.² The

Several of the insights in this chapter were presented at a 2018 symposium organized at the University of Wisconsin–Madison to mark the five-hundredth anniversary of Machiavelli's *Mandragola*. The symposium, entitled “On Human Nature: Machiavelli's *Mandrake* at 500,” was conceptualized by Kristin Phillips-Court and brought together colleagues across diverse disciplines in the hopes of achieving two concrete aims: to explore how Machiavelli's innovative comedy accommodates different hermeneutical approaches, and to share new directions and insights for studying *Mandragola* as an incisive depiction of human nature. As of this writing, the conference schedule is still available to view online. Visit <https://irh.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1103/2018/08/events-Machiavelli-2018-2.pdf> for full details. I would also like to recognize the contributions of Michelle Clark, Susan Gaylard, Daniel Kapust, Ronald L. Martinez, Andrea Moudarres, Kristin Phillips-Court, Katherine Robiadek, Jordan Rosenblum, Walter Stephens, Eleonora Stoppino, Jane Tylus, and Catherine Zuckert, whose curiosity and intellectual generosity has in no small measure inspired the research developed within the present study.

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. Martina Di Febo (Milan: BUR, 2013), 146. (“So simple-minded are men and so controlled by immediate necessities that [one] who deceives always finds men who let themselves be deceived,” trans. Gilbert, 65.) Citations of *Il Principe* are from this edition. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The Prince*, trans. Allan Gilbert, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, vol. 1 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989). Citations of Machiavelli's other works, including *Mandragola*, also come from the same series of volumes and translation.

² Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 146. (“[one must] be a great simulator and dissimulator,” trans. Gilbert, 65.)

citation also effectively encapsulates the main plot of Machiavelli's comedy *Mandragola* (c. 1518), in which Messer Nicia, the gullible Florentine lawyer, allows his all-encompassing desire to have a child (that is, his "necessità presente") to overcome his reason. As Nicia confesses in his own words at the start of the comedy, "Io ho tanta voglia d'avere figliuoli, che io son per fare ogni cosa"—a portent of events to come.³ What Nicia seeks is a remedy that will cure the supposed infertility of his wife, Lucrezia, so she can bear him an heir to perpetuate his lineage. The remedy itself is presented as an ironic rhetorical trope that works as a toxic cure: Nicia becomes convinced that a potion made of mandrake root (*mandragola*) will restore his wife's health but kill the first man to engage her in sexual relations. A stand-in, a disposable person destined to die, must then take Nicia's place in the marital bed to absorb the poison from her body by and thereby to furnish the husband with a newly fertile wife. As the audience learns, however, the mandrake remedy is just an elaborate ruse designed to convince Nicia to let a stranger take his wife to bed.⁴

³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, ed. Gian Mario Anselmi (Milan: Mursia, 1984), I.2. ("I have such a longing to have children that I'm ready to do anything," trans. Gilbert, 783.) References are to act and scene.

⁴ For the convenience of the reader, an extended synopsis of the play follows: The bumbling but wealthy Messer Nicia Calfucci desires an heir above all else, but his young wife, Lucrezia, has been unable to conceive and is suspected to be infertile. Meanwhile the young and passionate Callimaco, who has been living in Paris where he was sent to live as a young child as a result of the wars in Italy, has heard tell of Lucrezia's beauty and virtue and returns to Florence to see for himself. He soon falls madly in love and designs to have her at any cost. The lovesick Callimaco befriends Ligurio, the local parasite, who has agreed to help him bed Lucrezia for a small price. Ligurio has Callimaco pose as a physician to convince Nicia that the cure for Lucrezia's sterility is a remedy concocted from the mandrake root. As Dottor Callimaco opportunely devises, the potion will kill the first person who sleeps with Lucrezia, so Nicia must find an unwitting *garzonaccio* to suffer the burden. By no coincidence, Ligurio knows just the man for the job—Callimaco, disguised yet again. According to the plan, this will allow Callimaco to enter Lucrezia's bed chamber, at which point he will reveal his true identity and express his undying love for her, winning her over mind and body. Yet the task remains to convince the virtuous Lucrezia to submit herself to this cure; when she hears of the plot, she is aghast. Only through careful persuasion by Fra Timoteo, the local friar, and her own mother Sostrata does Lucrezia agree to the proposal. The scheme goes off without a hitch, ostensibly bringing a happy ending to all involved: Callimaco conquers Lucrezia; Nicia and Sostrata are delighted at the prospect of a child; Ligurio has secured three meals a day at the Calfucci house; and Fra Timoteo is delivered the 300 *ducati* promised for his cooperation.

Mandragola's plot centers on the driving forces of desire and deception, and how one remedy—the titular *mandragola*—is manipulated in different ways to achieve each character's own individual ends. Illness permeates the play: first, Lucrezia is believed to be infertile, and therefore Nicia's desire to procure an antidote is the first catalyst for the unfolding of events. Next, we encounter the implication of Messer Nicia's physiological impotence, which transforms into a metaphor for social dysfunction upon closer examination. Finally, the lovesickness of the young, soon-to-be paramour, Callimaco, sets in motion the play's ultimate *beffa* as he concocts the scheme that will fulfill all their desires. While the mandrake serves as the literal and metaphorical remedy for these maladies, both Nicia and Callimaco make use of it for their own selfish ends, with varying consequences, as we shall see. The astute Lucrezia, on the other hand, is acted upon by these men until she takes action for herself, ensuring that the desires of others come to benefit her as well. Evoking the iconography of Roman Lucretia through the figure of an empowered Florentine counterpart, I shall argue that *Mandragola* presents Machiavelli's re-imagining of this central founding mythology. Through the figure of the triumphant Lucrezia, Machiavelli presents a new vision for the Italian republic founded on peace, prosperity, and perspicacity.

While the dating of *Mandragola* has been subject to some debate, there is some general agreement that Machiavelli wrote the comedy sometime around the year 1518, approximately three years after the composition of *Il Principe*.⁵ There exist few records about the comedy and its performances from the early sixteenth century, and the text itself originates from one manuscript

⁵ For a thorough accounting of the dating of *Mandragola*, see Sergio Bertelli, "When Did Machiavelli Write *Mandragola*?" *Renaissance Quarterly* 24.3 (1971): 317-326. According to Bertelli's analysis, the comedy was written no earlier than 1512 and no later than 1520, though Roberto Ridolfi identifies a more specific date in winter 1518. For Ridolfi's hypothesis, see Roberto Ridolfi, *Studi sulle commedie del Machiavelli* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi Editori, 1968).

alone (and found in only one other anonymous edition).⁶ The 1518 dating also reveals a connection to Machiavelli's biography: by this time, he had been exiled from his beloved city of Florence and banished from public life, following the Medici family's return to power in 1513.⁷ Accused of participating in a conspiracy against the powerful dynasty, Machiavelli was forced to live out the remainder of his days on his family's farm in the outskirts of the Florentine province. Such biographic details make their way into the prologue of *Mandragola*, where Machiavelli writes of his desire to appear 'sage' and 'serious' ("saggio e grave") while attempting to 'make his sad time sweeter' with this new comic enterprise.⁸ These lines are most commonly interpreted as a reference to his exile and banishment from political activity and, in the view of Albert R. Ascoli and Victoria Kahn, point to a "radical ambivalence" about the more literary pursuits Machiavelli had undertaken in the period following his exile.⁹ This assessment is convincing, especially when

⁶ Bertelli, "When Did Machiavelli Write *Mandragola*?": 317-318. Richard Andrews also provides an overview of this early textual history, scant as it may be: we know, for example, that *Mandragola* was first performed in a private house (rather than at court) "for what amounted to a literary and social club," and that the text was printed several times while Machiavelli was still alive. As Andrews and others have noted, it remains one of the best known (and most translated) of the Cinquecento comedies. See Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 51-52. See also Alessandro Parronchi, "La prima rappresentazione della *Mandragola*," *La Bibliofilia* 64.1 (1962): 37-86.

⁷ There are many excellent sources on Machiavelli's life and work. Several texts that have guided my understanding are Robert Ridolfi, *Vita di Machiavelli* (Rome: Angelo Belardetti Editore, 1954), translated into English by Cecil Grayson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968); Christopher Celenza, *Machiavelli: A Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Isaiah Berlin, "The originality of Machiavelli," in *Studies on Machiavelli*, ed. Myron P. Gilmore (Florence: Sansoni, 1972), 147-206; and Ascoli, Albert R. and Vitoria Kahn (eds), *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁸ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, prologue: "E , se questa materia non è degna, // per essere pur leggieri, // d'un uom, che voglia parer saggio e grave, // scusatelo con questo, che s'ingegna // con questi van' pensieri // fare el suo tristo tempo più suave, // perché altrove non have // dove voltare el viso, // che gli è stato interciso // mostrar con altre imprese altra virtute, // non sendo premio alle fatiche sue." ("And if this material—since really it is slight—does not befit a man who likes to seem wise and dignified, make this excuse for him, that he is striving with these trifling thoughts to make his wretched life more pleasant, for otherwise he doesn't know where to turn his face, since he has been cut off from showing other powers with other deeds, there being no pay for his labors," trans. Gilbert, 777-778).

⁹ Ascoli and Kahn, "Introduction," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, 2.

considered alongside other instances of Machiavelli's frustrated dissatisfaction—Ascoli and Kahn cite the author's famous 1513 letter to Francesco Vettori as well as his correspondence in 1517 with Ludovico Alamanni, in which Machiavelli laments the lack of recognition for both his political and literary contributions.¹⁰ It is worth considering, then, why Machiavelli would turn to the theater as a way to remedy this sense of exclusion from public life. If we consider the performing arts, and dramatic spectacle in particular, as part of the thriving visual culture of the Renaissance, then Machiavelli's keen interest in developing his own cultural poetics through the art of the theater signals, to my mind, not quite a "radical ambivalence" as much as a radical *reimagining* of the noetic power of the literary arts. This chapter, and all the chapters that follow, thus aim to investigate how the theater—and especially Cinquecento comedy—made use of the potential of collective perception to examine and question the socio-cultural and political structures of Renaissance society, and to advance new ideas and ways of thinking. In *Mandragola*, Machiavelli relies on his political experience and humanistic education while harnessing the power of the theater to stage a worldview entirely his own, precisely when he was banned from expressing such ideologies in the more traditional spaces of civic life.

Among Machiavelli's comedies, *Mandragola* has achieved the most popular success and received the greatest share of critic attention.¹¹ In past fifty years, a significant portion of this scholarly attention has sought to situate this comedy within the larger scope of Machiavelli's political and moral philosophy. The play itself does not shy away from its contemporary context:

¹⁰ For Machiavelli's letters, see Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere*, ed. Franco Gaeta (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961). In Gaeta's edition, the letter to Francesco Vettori, dated 10 December 1513, is n. 140 (301-306); the letter to Ludovico Alamanni, from 17 December 1517, is n. 170 (382-384), also cited in Ascoli and Kahn, "Introduction," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, 1-3.

¹¹ Machiavelli wrote his first comedy, *Le maschere*, in 1504, though it was later destroyed by a grandson. He also composed a comedy based on Terence's *Andria*, though it was largely a translation of the original. Following *Mandragola*, Machiavelli wrote his final comedy, *Clizia*, in 1525.

the author explicitly situates the plot along historical timelines and alludes to a number of historico-political realities throughout.¹² Readings of *Mandragola* as political allegory are thus commonly found, as are interpretations that align the play with the facts of Machiavelli's own biography, in particular the challenges he faced after the return of the Medici to Florence.¹³ Along similar lines, other critics have looked to *Mandragola* for evidence of Machiavelli's self-concept, working to reconcile "Machiavelli the father of political science and Machiavelli the artist."¹⁴ Still others have turned to the play's social and cultural contexts. Jane Tylus, for example, has concentrated on the origins of Renaissance theater and its social utility; for Tylus, *Mandragola*'s usefulness in particular depends on the connection between private and public spheres of knowledge.¹⁵ Other recent studies have examined *Mandragola* from the perspective of sex and gender studies, such as Yael Manes' work on Machiavelli's mothers and daughters and Konrad Eisenbichler's study of

¹² One much-discussed example can be found in III.3, when Fra Timoteo speaks with an unnamed woman who relays her fear of an impending Turkish invasion of Italy: "Credete voi che 'l Turco passi questo anno in Italia? [...] Io ho una gran paura di quello impalare." Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, III.3). ("Do you believe the Turk is coming over into Italy this year? [...] I'm so afraid of that impaling," trans. Gilbert, 796.) The line serves as a double entendre, suggesting the threat of rape that typically accompanied the foreign invasion.

¹³ Among the most well-known of these political readings are Theodore A. Sumberg, "La mandragola, An Interpretation," *Journal of Politics* 23.2 (1961): 320-340; Parronchi, "La prima rappresentazione della *Mandragola*": 37-86; Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, 172-175; Frank Fata, "Machiavellian Strategies in *Mandragola*," *Machiavellian Studies* 2 (1988): 89-101; and Mera J. Flaumenhaft, "The Comic Remedy in Private Spectacle: Machiavelli's *Mandragola*," in *The Civic Spectacle: Essays on Drama and Community* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 85-126. Each aligns the main characters of the comedy with a different historical figure. For Sumberg, the young Callimaco is a generic Machiavellian Prince, while for Parronchi, Callimaco must be Lorenzo de' Medici upon his return from France. For both Parronchi and Ridolfi, the impotent and ineffectual Nicia stands in for the Florentine *gonfaloniere* Piero Soderini. For Fata, it is Lucrezia who embodies the figure of the Prince. Flaumenhaft concludes that Ligurio, who "has ruled the ruler" (91), is Machiavelli himself.

¹⁴ Here I quote John Bernard, whose insightful essay on Machiavelli's so-called 'literary evolution' argues for an understanding of Machiavelli's 'imaginative' writing as an act of freedom. See John Bernard, "Writing and the Paradox of the Self: Machiavelli's Literary Vocation," *Renaissance Quarterly* 59.1 (2006): 59-80 (cit. 59).

¹⁵ Jane Tylus, "Theater and Its Social Uses: Machiavelli's *Mandragola* and the Spectacle of Infamy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53.3 (2000): 656-686, in particular 679-683.

sexual desire and marriage practices in Renaissance culture as revealed in the play.¹⁶ Furthermore, Ronald Martinez and, more recently, Susan Gaylard, have highlighted Machiavelli's medical rhetoric, and specifically how *Mandragola* advances themes connected to pharmacy, purgation, and renewal.¹⁷ This chapter aims to expand upon these insights to examine how *Mandragola* develops the motifs of sickness and (toxic) cure before moving to a discussion of Machiavelli's conceptualization of theater itself as a social and political remedy.

Mandragola in Literature and in Life

The word *mandragola* first appears in the comedy's prologue, when the author announces the name of the spectacle that the audience is about to behold: "La favola «Mandragola» si chiama: la cagion voi vedrete // nel recitarla, com'i' m'indovino."¹⁸ The association here of *favola*, meaning fairy tale or fable (though it was not uncommonly used to refer to comedies in this period), and *mandragola* announces the play's relationship to remedy, superstition, and morality. The use of the word *favola*, in fact, aligns the comedy with a longer cultural tradition, calling to mind the mythos of the fable whose underlying intent is to impart a moral lesson. Thus the *favola* of the mandrake and the *favola* of *Mandragola* coalesce in active engagement with existing discourses of literature, culture, medicine, and philosophy. It is worth noting, then, that the comedy's first

¹⁶ Yael Manes, "What is a Mother's Worth? The Negotiation of Motherhood and *Virtù* in Machiavelli's *La Mandragola* (1518)" in *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities in Sixteenth-Century Italian Comedy* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 13-41; and Konrad Eisenbichler, "Sex and Marriage in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*: A Close(t) Reading," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 40.1 (2017): 13-35. Along similar lines,

¹⁷ Ronald Martinez, "The Pharmacy of Machiavelli: Roman Lucretia in *Mandragola*," *Renaissance Drama* 14.1 (1983): 1-43; Susan Gaylard, "Machiavelli's Medical *Mandragola*: Knowledge, Food, and Feces," *Renaissance Quarterly* 74 (2021): 59-93. I would also point the reader to Ezio Raimondi, "Il veleno della *Mandragola*," in *Politica e commedia: Dal Beroaldo al Machiavelli* (Bologna: Mulino, 1972), 115-127, for an earlier reading of the comedy's metaphor of the toxic mandrake.

¹⁸ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, prologue. ("The story is called *Mandragola*. You will see the reason when it is acted, I foretell," trans. Gilbert, 777).

printed editions (1518, 1522) would bear another name: *Comedia di Callimaco e di Lucrezia* (Comedy of Callimaco and Lucrezia). Still others in Machiavelli's own circle referred to the comedy as *Messer Nicia*.¹⁹ These alternative designations suggest that contemporary reception of the play was focused on the intrigues of its central characters, whose selfishness seemed to mirror the cynicism of the Florentine merchant class. Indeed, self-interest drives the plot, and it is the mandrake potion that enables the characters to pursue their own personal objectives. It was not until 1524 that the printed editions would return to the title that the prologue announces, perhaps at the author's own insistence.²⁰ The reinstatement of the internal title, *Mandragola*, thus underscores the centrality of remedy to the plot, both figuratively and fictitiously. Though the scheme involving the mandrake potion is entirely invented by Callimaco, it creates opportunities for all the characters to manipulate the fears, desires, and ambitions of others.

Machiavelli's decision to hinge the plot of his comedy on the *mandragola* as its botanical remedy is rooted within the context of the plant's mystical and legendary history, which spans more than three millennia.²¹ In ancient Greece and Rome, writers from Dioscorides to Aristotle to Pliny the Elder all discussed the mandrake's medicinal properties, and in particular its anesthetic qualities.²² Moreover, because the mandrake contains hallucinogenic tropane alkaloids and the

¹⁹ Ridolfi, *Studie sulle commedie di Machiavelli*, 71-72; Aquilecchia, "La favola *Mandragola* si chiama," in *Collected Essays on Italian Language and Literature Presented to Kathleen Speight*, eds. Giovanni Aquilecchia, Stephen N. Cristea, and Sheila Ralphs (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 74; Gaylard, "Machiavelli's Medical *Mandragola*": 59-60.

²⁰ Ridolfi speculates that Machiavelli may have been involved in the printer's decision to reintroduce the original title; see Ridolfi, *Studi sulle commedie del Machiavelli*, 76-77; Giovanni Aquilecchia has demonstrated that returning to the comedy's internal title would have presented a significant risk to the publisher, having already circulated editions under another designation. Thus, the change must have been considered worth such a gamble. See Aquilecchia, "La favola *Mandragola* si chiama," 74-77.

²¹ Susan Gaylard provides a thorough overview of this history in Gaylard, "Machiavelli's Medical *Mandragola*:" 64-67.

²² For a detailed account of the mandrake's use as an anesthetic from antiquity through the Middle Ages, see Marta Mion, "From 'Circe's Root' to 'Spongia Soporifera': The Role of the Mandrake as True Anesthetic of Ancient Times," *Journal of Anesthesia History* 3 (2017): 128-133. as well as Frederick J.

shape of the root can resemble the human figure, it has found an easy association with various superstition practices throughout history.²³ As a number of sources report, certain secret rituals were conducted during the root's gathering, believed to be a dangerous undertaking. The harvest could only take place at night, removed from the ground by a dog who would then be offered in sacrifice to atone for the offense against nature.²⁴ In antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages, the mandrake root was also used internally to treat variously anxiety, melancholy, convulsions, and mania. It was also popular in folklore as an aphrodisiac, a hypnotic, a fertility charm, and a talisman for love as well as luck. The oldest account of the legendary *mandragora* (as it is sometimes spelled) is found in the book of Genesis, where Rachel, the infertile wife of the patriarch Jacob, requests the mandrake from Leah, hopeful for a cure for her childlessness.²⁵ Poets and dramatists have equally been intrigued by the legendary mandrake. To name just a few examples from the English tradition, it seems that Chaucer may have been aware of the mandrake's fantastical properties, and later, Shakespeare refers to it in several of his plays, including *King Henry IV*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.²⁶ Machiavelli's own deployment of the

Simoons's chapter, "Mandrake, a Root Human in Form," in *Plants of Life, Plants of Death* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 101-135. For a history of the mandrake in literature, see Charles J. S. Thompson, *The Mystic Mandrake* (London: Rider, 1934, 1975).

²³ Mion, "The Role of the Mandrake as True Anesthetic of Ancient Times," 128; Thompson, *The Mystic Mandrake*, in particular 119-127; Simoons, "Mandrake, a Root Human in Form," 106-11.

²⁴ Thompson, *The Mystic Mandrake*, 153-162; Simoons, "Mandrake, a Root Human in Form," 120-125; Gaylard, "Machiavelli's Medical *Mandragola*": 64.

²⁵ Genesis: 1-2, 14-17; "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!' Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?' [...] In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, 'Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.' But she said to her, 'Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?' Rachel said, 'Then he may lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes.' When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him, and said, 'You must come in to me; for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.' So he lay with her that night. And God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son." Cfr. Thompson, *The Mystic Mandrake*, 27-29.

²⁶ Though Chaucer makes no explicit mention of the mandrake, Thompson points to several lines of *The Knight's Tale* which point to similar effects produced by "a certain wine." In the case of Shakespeare, the

mandrake in the comedy also draws on much of this legend and lore: Callimaco's anxious desires, Lucrezia's chaste reticence, and Nicia's apparent impotence each appeal to the plant's various applications.

In the course of the play's action, we do not encounter mention of the *mandragola* again until II.6, when Callimaco, pretending to be a doctor, convinces the gullible Nicia that he has the perfect cure (*rimedio*) for Nicia's infertile wife, Lucrezia:

Voi avete ad intender questo, che non è cosa più certa ad ingravidare una donna che dargli bere una pozione fatta di mandragola. Questa è una cosa sperimentata da me dua paia di volte, e trovata sempre vera; e, se non era questo, la reina di Francia sarebbe sterile, ed infinite altre principesse di quello stato.²⁷

Callimaco's lecture here draws on the mandrake's well-known associations with fertility and conception. According to him, 'nothing is more certain' to generate a pregnancy than to have a woman drink a potion made of mandrakes. Though the mandrake's connection to reproduction is largely the stuff of legend, these lines are also pseudo-scientific, as Callimaco, posing as a medical expert, emphasizes the empirical quality of his recommendations. The efficacy of the mandrake in this case is something that Callimaco himself had tested on multiple occasions—"questa è una cosa *sperimentata da me* dua paia di volte" (my emphasis). To strengthen his claims, he offers further proof by asserting that such a remedy was used by the Queen of France and 'countless other

playwright names the mandrake specifically in the four plays named here, and we may read allusions to it in *Cymbeline* and *Macbeth* as well. See Thompson, *The Mystic Mandrake*, 187-199, in particular 187-190. More recently, J.K. Rowling included the mandrake in the fictional world of her popular *Harry Potter* series, where the anthropomorphic plant, once matured, produces a cry fatal to all those who hear it. Interestingly, Rowling's version of the mandrake also acknowledges the plant's dual nature; in the second book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, this potentially deadly plant serves as the only cure for the 'petrification' of several students (dark magic that turns its victims to stone). Cfr. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic, 1999).

²⁷ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.6. ("The fact is, there's nothing surer to make a woman pregnant than to have her take a medicine made of mandrake. This is something I've tested two pairs of times [often] and always found true. If it hadn't been for this, the Queen of France would be barren, as well as countless other princesses in that country," trans Gilbert, 791).

princesses' besides. The mix of myth and medicine here echoes the history of the mandrake itself: an amalgamation of legend, superstition, pharmacology, and herbology, its plasticity makes it the ideal motif for Machiavelli's dark comedy.

Machiavelli's deployment in *Mandragola* of this particularly notorious plant must also be contextualized alongside the cultural inclinations of the Italian Renaissance. Richard Palmer has noted how a renewed interest in classical botany in the sixteenth century, prompted in part by the recent rediscovery of medical texts by Dioscorides and Theophrastus, led to a revival in the art of pharmacology. This new realm of knowledge had a profound influence on the field of therapeutics, and on medical botany in particular, which was elaborated through the study of the so-called *materia medica*.²⁸ The term itself—indicating the body of collected knowledge about the therapeutic properties of any substance used for healing purposes—derives from the title of a work by the ancient Greek physician Pedanius Dioscorides written in the first century CE entitled *De materia medica*.²⁹ Dioscorides' five-book treatise is a pharmacopoeia of herbs and the medicines that can be obtained from them. In this text, Dioscorides recorded many plants that were previously unknown to earlier Greek and Roman physicians, detailing over one thousand remedies that utilized six hundred plants and plant products. He describes their qualities and remedial effects, as well as their botany and living morphology. While *De materia medica* gained further renown with

²⁸ Richard Palmer, "Pharmacy in the republic of Venice in the sixteenth century," in *The Medical Renaissance of the Sixteenth Century*, eds. A. Wear, R. K. French, and I. M. Lonie (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 100-101.

²⁹ Dioscorides (c. 40–90 CE) was a Cilician Greek and army physician in service for the Roman Empire. His experience in the Roman army allowed him to study disease and medicinal botany, later compiling his work in the five-book treatise *De materia medica*, the subjects of which are as follows: Book One: Aromatics; Book Two: Living Creatures and Fats; Book Three: Roots; Book Four: Other Herbs and Roots; Book Five: Vines and Wines. For a useful modern English translation, see Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica. A New Indexed Version in Modern English*, ed. T. A. Osbaldeston (Johannesburg, South Africa: Ibidis Press, 2000). On Dioscorides and *De materia medica*, see John M. Riddle, *Dioscorides on Pharmacy and Medicine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 87-ff.

Pietro Andrea Mattoli's commentary on the 1548 edition of the text, its discovery in the preceding century initiated this renewed interest in medical botany and the remedies it could provide. It seems likely that this broader cultural awareness may have been an influence on Machiavelli's own adaptation of the mandrake in the comedy.

Dioscorides's discussion the *mandragoras* plant in the *De materia medica* illustrates its broad range of uses. Classified in the text as a "narcotic" and a "poison," Dioscorides begins his description of the mandrake with by placing it within the folklore tradition, explaining that "*Mandragoras* has a root that seems to be a maker of love medicines."³⁰ He goes on to describe its physical appearance and preparation for consumption, before turning to a more thorough account of its applications:

They use a winecupful of it for those who cannot sleep, or are seriously injured, and whom they wish to anaesthetise to cut or cauterize. Twenty grains of the juice (taken as a drink with honey and water) expel phlegm and black bile upward like hellebore, but when too much is taken as a drink it kills. It is mixed with eye medicines, medications to ease pain, and softening suppositories. As much as five grains (applied alone) expels the menstrual flow and is an abortifacient, and put up into the perineum as a suppository it causes sleep. The root is said to soften ivory, boiled together with it for six hours, and to make it ready to be formed into whatever shape a man wants. Applied with polenta, the new leaves are good both for inflammations of the eyes and ulcers. They dissolve all hardnesses, abscesses, glandular tumours [possibly goitre], and tumours. Rubbed on gently for five or six days it defaces scars without ulcerating.³¹

This passage underlines the mandrake's manifold uses. It can be applied as a soporific or an anesthetic, as a purgative or abortifacient, and even as an anti-inflammatory. It can vanish malignancies of the body and efface its scars. It calms, purges, restores, and renews. This

³⁰ Dioscorides, *De materia medica*, trans. T. A. Osbaldeston, 624.

³¹ Dioscorides, *De materia medica*, trans. T. A. Osbaldeston, 655.

description of the mandrake's diverse applications emphasizes the remedy's malleability and versatility. Importantly, however, Dioscorides also stresses moderation here—in excess, he cautions, the mandrake proves lethal.³² This duality is a key feature of Machiavelli's own adaption of the mandrake lore in the comedy. In his exchange with Nica, 'Dottor' Callimaco is careful to warn of the remedy's dangerous side effects:

CALLIMACO:	E' bisogna ora pensare a questo: che quello uomo che ha prima a fare seco, presa che l'ha, cotesta pozione, muore infra otto giorni, e non lo camperebbe el mondo.
NICIA:	Cacasangue! Io non voglio cotesta suzzacchera! A me non l'apiccherai tu! Voi mi avete concio bene!
CALLIMACO:	State saldo, e' ci è rimedio.
NICIA:	Quale?
CALLIMACO:	Fare dormire subito con lei un altro che tiri, standosi seco una notte, a se' tutta quella infezione della mandragola: dipoi vi iacerete voi senza pericolo. ³³

³² Though the mandrake has a long history of associations with the superstitious, a recent study of the *Mandragora autumnalis*, the principal Mediterranean species, demonstrates that the pre-modern mythology surrounding this legendary plant was not entirely mistaken in its assessment of the mandrake's more dangerous properties. According to the study, the alkaloids make the plant, in particular the roots and the leaves, poisonous, via the anticholinergic, hallucinogenic, and hypnotic effects. Anticholinergic properties can also lead to asphyxiation. Ingesting mandrake root is likely to have other adverse effects such as vomiting and diarrhea. Moreover, because the alkaloid concentration varies between plant samples, accidental poisoning is likely to occur. Clinical reports of the effects of consumption of *Mandragora autumnalis* include severe symptoms similar to those of atropine poisoning, including blurred vision, pupil dilation, mouth dryness, difficulty in urinating, dizziness, headache, vomiting, blushing, and a rapid heart rate. See Giovita A. Piccillo, Enrico G.M. Mondati, and Paola A. Moro, "Six clinical cases of *Mandragora autumnalis* poisoning: diagnosis and treatment," *European Journal of Emergency Medicine* 9 (2002): 342-447.

³³ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.6. ("Callimaco: Now we've got to think about something else: namely, that the first man who has to do with her after she takes the medicine will die within eight days, and all the world can't save him. / Nica: Shit! I don't want this vinegar and sugar; you won't put it off on me. You've got me in a nice state. / Callimaco: Be calm, there's a way out [lit. there's a remedy]. / Nica: What? / Callimaco: Get somebody to sleep with her right after it; if he's with her one night, he'll draw to himself all the poison of the mandrake. Then you can lie with her without danger," trans. Gilbert, 791.)

These lines exemplify the cynicism that pervades the comedy. Nicia's willingness to subject his wife to Callimaco's plan again calls to mind that Machiavellian precept about men's weakness in the face of their immediate needs—"che colui che inganna troverà sempre chi si lascerà ingannare."³⁴ Callimaco, in turn, understands how to manipulate Nicia's fears and desires, but also how to twist the mandrake lore to his benefit. Though Callimaco emphasizes the mandrake's renown as a remedy for infertility, we know from Dioscorides and others that the mandrake root was identified as a soporific. Plying Lucrezia with such a potion, which was also known to treat disquietude, would effectually render her more passive in the face of a surprise visit to her bedroom from an unknown man. Yet the more sinister aspect of this plan is revealed in Callimaco's warning about the mandrake's dangerous side effects: though it will solve the present dilemma of Lucrezia's infertility (and potential resistance), it will kill the first person to have sex with her within eight days. Upon learning of the possible risk to his own life, Nicia balks. Anticipating Nicia's self-interest, Callimaco recites his prepared plan: a stand-in of no consequence will take Nicia's place, a sacrifice made for the 'greater good' of his continued lineage.

Allan Gilbert suggests that Callimaco's proposition is especially persuasive due to the popular belief that certain diseases, but especially those especially communicative ones such as syphilis and leprosy, could be eliminated simply by transferring it to another through the act of sexual intercourse. Gilbert cites Matteo Bandello (1484/5–1561) as a contemporary source for such a superstition, which features in tale from his *Novelle*, 1.37.³⁵ In this novella, a beautiful young wife hears a rumor that men infected with leprosy are better lovers. Desiring to test this herself, the wife finds a pleasing young leper with whom she has sex "piú e piú volte" while her jealous and

³⁴ Again, the reference is to chapter 18 of *Il Principe*. See Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 146; "[one] who deceives always finds men who let themselves be deceived," trans. Gilbert, 65.

³⁵ Gilbert, *Machiavelli: Chief Works and Others*, vol. 2, 791n3.

possessive husband is away on business.³⁶ When her husband returns, the wife confesses and wants to spare her husband from a possible infection himself. Miraculously, the husband forgives her but seeks to cure her so that they can safely resume their marital relations, so he travels to Paris to consult renowned doctors on the matter:

I signori medici promisero di far di modo che egli si contenteria; e poi che il caso ebbero diligentemente studiato e con molte ragioni tra loro conferito, conchiusero di comun parere che la più utile e salubre medicina, che a la donna dar si potesse, era che quella per tre o quattro mesi, ogni giorno, quante più volte poteva, con diverse persone amorosamente si prendesse piacere, perciò che ella potrebbe di leggero di tal maniera purgarsi che daria il male ad altri ed ella si sanerebbe, come dicevano anco avvenire a una donna che avesse il mal francese.³⁷

Both Machiavelli's and Bandello's accounts of this superstitious belief rely on the prestige of and trust in physicians, who instill confidence by emphasizing their empirical reasoning—in Callimaco's case, the remedy is “una cosa sperimentata da me,” and with the wise Parisian doctors of Bandello's novella, the issue is “diligentemente studiato.”³⁸ They also emphasize the general naïveté of human beings, especially when influenced by surrounding lore, whether related to the power of the mandrake, the lustfulness of the leprotic, or the transmissibility of disease. In

³⁶ Matteo Bandello, *Le novelle del Bandello* in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 1, ed. Francesco Flora (Milan: Mondadori, 1952), 448-452, cit. 450. Bandello was a Dominican friar, born sometime between 1484-1485 in Castelnuovo Scrivia, at that time a part the state of Milan. His *Novelle* belongs to the long prose tradition following Giovanni Boccaccio, though Bandello's work illustrates the author's extensive experience amongst the courts of Lombardy in the earlier part of the fifteenth century and was equally influenced by his connection with Marguerite de Navarre, who was composing her *Heptameron* during the same period. See the introduction to Francesco Flora's edition of his collected works for an overview of Bandello's work and the importance of his *Novelle*.

³⁷ Bandello, *Novelle*, 451. (“The good doctors promised to make [the husband] happy; and since the case had been diligently studied with a great deal of consultation between them, they concluded in common opinion that the most useful and healthful medicine that they could give the woman would be that—for three or four months, every day, as many times as she could with different people, take her loving pleasure. In this way, she could slowly purge herself by giving the sickness to others while she cured herself, just as they say happened to a woman who had the French disease [syphilis],” my translation.)

³⁸ For a historical treatment of the medical profession in early Renaissance Florence following the fourteenth-century outbreak of the Black Plague, see Katharine Park, *Doctors and Medicine in Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Bandello's novella, the wife sets the tale in motion, both by believing in the gossip and allowing her own appetite to overcome her reason. Yet it is her husband who is eventually cast as the cuckolded fool, persuaded by the "piú famosi ed eccellenti medici che vi fossero" to share his wife again and again.³⁹ In these stories, a husband's desire and desperation lead him to adopt absurd remedies, which are promised to grant him the thing he wants most, at a cost. It is the price paid that exposes their stupidity and single-mindedness, as Bandello reveals in the final lines of the novella: "Ma il troppo amore che a la moglie portava gli aveva accecati gli occhi e adombrato l'animo, di modo che era sforzato in ogni cosa a compiacere a quella."⁴⁰ Here excess love has deprived the husband of his senses, leading him to a solution that seems designed to punish him for his jealous and dominating ways.

In *Mandragola*, Machiavelli exploits the paradoxical nature of the mandrake to make a larger point about the folly and destructiveness of individual desire. When self-interest subordinates reason and undermines the common good, the more violent qualities of the remedy emerge. In the comedy, both Nicia and Callimaco conspire in their own ways to subjugate Lucrezia to their urges. Harvey Mansfield has argued that Nicia's (and Lucrezia's) longing for a child eclipses Callimaco's burning lust for Lucrezia, allowing the couple to manipulate Callimaco—"making his desire a means to the realization of theirs."⁴¹ Yet Nicia's use of the mandrake potion has negative implications for his honor, his manhood, and his authority in both public and private domains. While both men adopt the mandrake in pursuit of their own ends—ends which are

³⁹ Bandello, *Novelle*, 451. ("The most famous and excellent doctors there were," my translation.)

⁴⁰ Bandello, *Novelle*, 452. ("But the excess love that he felt for his wife blinded his eyes and obfuscated his mind, so that he was forced in every matter to please her," my translation.)

⁴¹ Harvey Mansfield, "The Cuckold in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*," in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works*, ed. Vickie B. Sullivan (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 3.

eventually mutually realized—Nicia’s fundamental impotence impedes him from becoming the model citizen and powerful paterfamilias he aspires to be.

Nicia’s Toxic Cure: Impotence and Incompetence in Mandragola

As Ronald Martinez and Susan Gaylard have highlighted, *Mandragola*’s medical rhetoric contains political contours.⁴² The connection between medicine and politics recurs throughout Machiavelli’s work: in his *Principe* as well as the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, we find the metaphor of the statesman as doctor who has the power to cure the sick body politic.⁴³ Such metaphors are often linked with the idea of prudence, where it is not only a matter of one’s ability to resolve such problems, but of the application of the remedy itself:

Perché e’ Romani feciono in questi casi quello che tutti e’ principi savi debbono fare: e’ quali non solamente hanno ad avere riguardo alli scandoli presenti, ma a’ futuri, e a quelli con ogni industria ovviare; perché, prevedendosi discosto, vi si può facilmente rimediare, ma, aspettando che ti si appressino, la medicina non è a tempo, perché la malattia è diventata incurabile; e interviene di questa, come dicono e’ fisici dello etico, che nel principio del suo male è facile a curare e difficile a conoscere; ma nel progresso del tempo, non la avendo nel principio conosciuta né medicata, diventa facile a conoscere e difficile a curare. Così interviene nelle cose di stato: perché conoscendo discosto, il che non è dato se non a uno prudente, e’ mali che nascono in quello si guariscono presto; ma quando, per non gli avere conosciuti, si lasciano crescere in mondo che ognuno gli conosce, non vi è più rimedio.⁴⁴

⁴² Martinez, “The Pharmacy of Machiavelli,” in particular 27–28, 33; Gaylard, “Machiavelli’s Medical *Mandragola*”: 60–61.

⁴³ The theme is most explicit in chapter 3 of *Il Principe*, though the motif of “remedy” (*rimedio*) appears throughout the treatise. In the *Discorsi*, the metaphor is revisited several times, most notably in the introduction to book 1 and later in 1.39, as well as throughout book 3. See in particular *Discorsi*, 3.49: “È di necessità, come altre volte si è detto, che ciascuno dì in una città grande naschino accidenti che abbiano bisogno del medico; e secondo che gl’importano più, conviene trovare il medico più savio,” in Machiavelli, *Opere*, ed. Rinaldo Rinaldi (Turin: UTET, 1999, 2006), 1194. (“It must be, as I have said before, that every day in a large city emergencies will occur that have need of a physician, and in proportion as they are more important, a wiser physician is needed,” trans. Gilbert, 527.)

⁴⁴ Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 36. (“In these instances the Romans did what all wise princes do: these take thought not merely for present discords but also for future ones, and the latter they forestall with every sort of ingenuity; when foreseen far ahead, discords can be easily remedied, but when you wait until they are upon you, the medicine is not in time; they have grown incurable. It is the same as with hectic fever; the

Here Machiavelli emphasizes two qualities in particular that the prince should have: prudence and foresight. Both are critical to the ruler, for prudence ideas allows him to understand what remedies must be applied and how, while foresight aids in not only when to deploy them in the present, but also how to use them to prevent future troubles as well. If it is too late, Machiavelli warns, the medicine will not be enough—the disease has become incurable. Another significant aspect of this passage is the author’s use of the verb *conoscere* (to know), which is semantically distinct from the verb *sapere* (which also translates in English as ‘to know’). While both relate to the acquisition of information, the verb *sapere* implies a passive mode of fact learning, while *conoscere* connotes a more active form of attaining knowledge, earned through careful study, reasoning, and analysis that leads to wisdom. In the context of Machiavelli’s thought, to know something is to recognize its truth, analyze it, and apply it to one’s advantage. It is thus connected to methods of deduction and adaption, sharing a root with the English word ‘cognition,’ the process of learning through reasoning and thought. In *Il Principe*, the ability to know and to foresee is thus linked to the timeliness and ultimately the success of the remedy.

In *Mandragola*, Nicia embodies a negative exemplar of these qualities: a composition of two comic typologies, the gullible husband and the arrogant but dim-witted lawyer, Nicia is portrayed as a silly and ineffectual patriarch who cannot recognize the problems of his household.⁴⁵ When his wife remains childless after six years of marriage, Nicia endeavors to find a cure for her

physicians say that when the disease begins it is easy to cure but hard to recognize, but in the course of time, when not recognized and treated at the beginning, it becomes easy to recognize and hard to cure. So it is in things of state; on early recognition (which is granted only to a prudent man), the maladies that spring up in a state can be healed speedily; but when, not being recognized, they are allowed to increase in such a way that everybody recognizes them, they can no longer be remedied,” trans. Gilbert, 16-17.)

⁴⁵ The plot pattern recurs throughout Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, from which a great deal of Cinquecento comedy gleaned inspiration. In particular, novellas featuring women deceiving men often include a clever wife and foolish husband. See in particular, II.3, 5, 7, 9; III.9, VII.2, 7, 8, and VIII.10, in Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca (Turin: Einaudi, 1980).

infertility, failing to recognize his own impotence and insinuated homosexuality.⁴⁶ Machiavelli establishes Nicia's impotence as both a literal and figurative sickness. Though, as we shall see, the comedy plays with the fact of his actual impotence in the bedroom, Nicia's inadequacy as a man and head of his household is epitomized by his willingness to be deceived by the other characters and his willingness to deceive himself. More specifically, it is Nicia's willingness to be cuckolded that marks his dishonor: it is not just the fact that his wife has sex with another man, but that Nicia is aware of it and indeed is the one who orchestrates it.

In *Mandragola*, Nicia's inexorable fallibility as a man and husband is linked to his impotence, both literally and figuratively. In two key scenes, his stupidity and his infertility coalesce to demonstrate his inability to lead the next generation—emphasizing, in Machiavellian terms, his lack of *virtù*. By calling into question Nicia's virility, the characters of *Mandragola* undermine his strength, honor, and ability to command respect. Anton Blok explains:

The deceived husband is dishonourable, and in more than one regard. His wife's adultery raises doubts not only about his sexual capacities but also about his capacity to protect her from the advances of other men, that this, his ability to control and monopolise his wife, to ensure her chastity and thus to guarantee the immunity of his domain.⁴⁷

In other words, the cuckolded husband has lost the esteem of those in his community by relinquishing his position of authority in his own household. He is incapable of protecting his

⁴⁶ There are several moments in the comedy that allude to Nicia's latent homosexuality. A primary example occurs in V.2, when Nicia caresses Callimaco's body in the dark, getting his 'hands in the dough' ("Poi che io avevo messo mano in pasta, io ne volli toccare el fondo") to check if Callimaco is well enough endowed. Nicia's comment—that he's not one to mistake a (tiny) firefly for a (big) lantern ("volli toccare con mano come la cosa andava, ché io non sono uso ad essermi dato ad intendere lucciole per lanterne")—implies his past experience with men's bodies. See Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, V.2. ("Since I'd put my hands into the dough, I wanted to go to the bottom of it"; "I wanted to touch with my hands how the thing was going, for I am not used to being made to take fireflies for lanterns," trans. Gilbert, 817.)

⁴⁷ Anton Blok, "Rams and Billy-Goats: A Key to the Mediterranean Code of Honour," *Man* 16.3 (1981): 431.

domain *and* the sanctity of his marriage, and thereby surrenders his honor as a man by allowing another to take his place. Adultery, therefore, enacts a rivalry between men for her subjugation, in which the adulterer demonstrates himself to be more powerful than the cuckolded husband: as Blok explains, “successful claims on a woman entail the domination of other men.”⁴⁸ The stigma surrounding the cuckolded husband thus marks his deficiency as a husband in two primary ways: first, he is perceived as incapable of maintaining his authority over his wife and household, and second, he is believed to be incapable of physically satisfying his wife, causing her to seek out another man.⁴⁹

In *Mandragola*, Nicia’s inability to have children with Lucrezia signals his failure in both of these arenas. Though Nicia indicates in several instances that he puts the blame on his wife for their childless marriage, the exchanges with Callimaco and Ligurio in II.2 and II.6 suggest that his deficiencies as a husband are the true cause, as we shall see. The implication of his sexual impotence and ineffectiveness as paterfamilias sets up the eventual conquest of his wife by another, which Nicia not only sanctions but orchestrates himself. Blinded by his arrogance and desire, Nicia willingly gives his wife to another so that she may fulfill her role as wife and mother, even when his actions undermine that very aim. He reveals himself to be not only incompetent but also morally corrupt as he bargains away Lucrezia’s virtue for his own self-interested aims.

Callimaco identifies the couple’s desperation to have children as an important factor in his overall plan to conquer the lovely Lucrezia, as he explains to his servant Siro early on the comedy:

CALLIMACO: E’ non è mai alcuna cosa sí disperata, che non
 vi sia qualche via da poterne sperare; e
 benché la fussi debole e vana, e la voglia e ’l

⁴⁸ Blok, “Rams and Billy-Goats”: 431.

⁴⁹ See also Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, “Introduction: Sexual Transgression as Social Metaphor,” in *Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th-17th century)*, ed. Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 1-2.

desiderio, che l'uomo ha di condurre la cosa,
non la fa parere cosí.

SIRO: Infine, e che vi fa sperare?

CALLIMACO: Dua cose: l'una, la semplicità di messer Nicia, che, benché sia dottore, egli è el piú semplice ed el piú sciocco uomo di Firenze; l'altra la voglia che lui e lei hanno d'avere figliuoli, che, sendo stata sei anni a marito e non avendo ancora fatti, ne hanno, sendo ricchissimi, un desiderio che muoiono.⁵⁰

Here Callimaco emphasizes his own will and desire (“la voglia e ’l desiderio”) as powerful forces enacted in his quest to dominate both husband and wife. Though his ultimate goal is the sexual conquest of Lucrezia, Callimaco must first deceive the foolish Nicia, who Callimaco characterizes as an easy mark—someone whose stupidity and foolishness will be easily manipulated by his rival, the shrewd and voracious younger man. Callimaco recognizes that the couple’s childless marriage presents a dilemma for both Nicia and Lucrezia: while Nicia lacks an heir to continue the familial line, Lucrezia’s position as a wife is undermined by her inability to become a mother. As Callimaco explains to Siro, this situation creates in them a powerful desire that in turn makes them vulnerable to his schemes. By underlining Nicia’s profession, his wealth, and his simple-mindedness (“benché sia dottore, egli è el piú semplice ed el piú sciocco uomo di Firenze”), Callimaco’s lines also foreshadow his subsequent encounter with Nicia, in which the judge’s arrogance, self-interest, and stupidity offer Callimaco an opportunity to redirect Nicia’s desires for his own benefit.

⁵⁰ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, I.1. (“Callimaco: Nothing is ever so hopeless that there isn’t some means that lets one hope for it, and even though it’s poor and weak, still a man’s resolve and eagerness to carry the affair through keep it from seeming so. / Siro: Well then, what makes you hope? / Callimaco: Two things. One is Messer Nicia’s stupidity, for though he’s a judge, he’s the stupidest and silliest man in Florence. The other is that both of them long to have children, for after being married six years and still not having any, and being very rich, they are so eager for them that they are dying of it,” trans. Gilbert, 780.)

The parasite Ligurio has also recognized Nicia's desperation, which leads Ligurio persuade to him to meet with a physician (Callimaco in disguise) who claims to have the perfect remedy for Nicia's problem. For his part, Nicia proclaims himself to be a prudent and cautious man who has a strong distrust of medical doctors, calling them a lot of imbeciles (*uccellacci*): "Oltr'a questo, io parlai iersera a parecchi medici: l'uno dice che io vadia a San Filippo, l'altro alla Porretta, e l'altro alla Villa; e' mi parvono parecchi uccellacci; e a dirti el vero, questi dottori di medicina non sanno quello che si pescano."⁵¹ Nicia's arrogant dismissal of realms of knowledge unknown to him is evidence of his foolishness, and such willful ignorance is a motif that recurs throughout Machiavelli's thought. As Gaylard points out, the proem to the *Discorsi* emphasizes the importance of ancient wisdom in the spheres of both law and medicine.⁵² For Machiavelli, historical example must be esteemed and imitated in present affairs, yet "non si truova principe né repubblica né capitano né cittadino che agli exempli degli antichi ricorra"—where men's weakness and imprudence lead them to devalue such knowledge.⁵³

Nicia embodies this critique not only in his reticence to rely on other's knowledge, but in his arrogance that he would know better than they about such matters. Explaining to Ligurio that he will be convinced only once he speaks with the physician himself, Nicia further proclaims his ability to discern the truth—"Ma della scienza io ti dirò bene io, come io gli parlo, s'egli è uomo di dottrina, perché a me non venderà egli vesciche."⁵⁴ In the comedy, Nicia often masks his

⁵¹ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, I.2. ("Besides that, I talked last evening with some doctors. One of them said I should go to San Filippo, another to Porretta, another to Villa; and they seem to me so many big fools; for to tell the truth, these doctors of medicine don't know what they're fishing for," trans. Gilbert, 782.)

⁵² Gaylard, "Machiavelli's Medical *Mandragola*": 61.

⁵³ Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 414-415, cit. 415. ("There exists no principate, no republic, no ruler nor citizen who turns to the examples of the ancients," my translation.)

⁵⁴ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.1. ("But as to his knowledge, I'll tell you myself, after I talk with him, whether he's a learned man, because he won't sell me any [inflated bladders]," trans. Gilbert, 786.) Gilbert offers several translations for the word "vesciche," including bubbles, inflated bladders, and balloons. He

incompetence with boastful bravado, here claiming to be able to spot a fraud by simply conversing with him, so that he will not be convinced of one thing when the truth is another. When Nicia meets with Callimaco, posing as a physician, he attempts to assert his intellectual superiority through language:

CALLIMACO:	Chi è quel che mi vuole?
NICIA:	Bona dies, domine magister.
CALLIMACO:	Et vobis bona, domine doctor.
LIGURIO:	(<i>piano, a Nicia</i>) Che vi pare?
NICIA:	(<i>piano, a Ligurio</i>) Bene, alle guagnele! ⁵⁵

Though Callimaco addresses him in the vernacular, Nicia responds with a Latin greeting to signal his own learnedness as well as to assess his interlocutor. When Callimaco replies in kind, his use of Latin (a trick that Callimaco relies upon throughout II.2 and II.6.) appears to have immediately convinced Nicia of his erudition. Despite his supercilious skepticism just one scene earlier in the exchange with Ligurio (II.1), Nicia's quick reversal further illustrates his naïveté and confirms Callimaco's estimation of his rival. By referring to Nicia's title ("domine doctor"), Callimaco flatters and disarms him by marking Nicia as an equal. As Daniel Kapust has argued, Machiavelli believed that overt flattery and ornamental rhetoric was the mark of untrustworthy counsel and

notes that the expression refers to calling something certain which is not in fact certain (see Gilbert, *Machiavelli: Chief Works and Others*, vol. 1, 786n1).

⁵⁵ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, I.2. ("Callimaco: Who is this man who wants me? / Nicia: *Bona dies domine magister* [Good day, sir doctor] / Callimaco: *Et vobis bona, domine doctor* [And to you, good doctor] / Ligurio: [quietly, to Nicia] How does he seem? / Nicia: [quietly, to Ligurio] Fine, by the Apostles!" I have expanded Gilbert's translation here to include clarifications on the Latin and on the didascalia for the asides between Nicia and Ligurio; cfr. Gilbert, 787.

associated plain style with sincerity.⁵⁶ In this scene, then, Callimaco's rhetorical style signals his intent to manipulate Nicia, enthralling him with his erudition and sycophancy.

As the scene continues, Callimaco begins to oscillate between flattery and subtle insults. Though his objective is to persuade Nicia to adopt the mandrake potion as the remedy for Lucrezia's infertility, Callimaco is compelled assert his superiority over his rival through linguistic sleights of hand, revealing the specular relationship between the two men. Even when ostensibly praising him, Callimaco's language is a double-edged sword, as seen in these lines: "A me non fia mai discaro fare piacere a voi ed a tutti li uomini virtuosi e da bene come voi; e non mi sono a Parigi affaticato tanti anni per imparare per altro, se non per potere service a' pari vostri."⁵⁷ On the surface, Callimaco's oleaginous words here are intended ingratiate him with Nicia by praising his virtue and honor, yet at the same time, his use of the adjective *discaro* ("A me non fia mai discaro fare piacere a voi"—that is, 'it will never be any bother for me to please you') signals a darker side to his flattery. Literally meaning *sgradevole* or *spiacevole* (unpleasant, disagreeable), the word *discaro* carries the additional nuance of believing something to be useless. In other words, while Callimaco is sweet-talking Nicia, assuring him that he is happy to be of service, his language exposes a more cynical meaning: that it is never *useless* to serve gullible men like foolish Messer Nicia.

Callimaco's most cutting insult to Nicia comes later in the same scene, veiled in Latin. Still posing as the knowledgeable physician, Callimaco offers several possible motives for Lucrezia's

⁵⁶ Daniel Kapust, "Without 'Superfluous Ornament': Castiglione, Machiavelli, and the Performance of Counsel," in *Flattery and the History of Political Thought: That Glib and Oily Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), in particular 65-66, 80-88.

⁵⁷ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.2. ("It'll never bother me to do a favor to you or to any man so able and worthy as you are. And I've not worked at my studies so many years in Paris for any other reason than to be able to help such men as you," trans. Gilbert, 787.)

inability to become pregnant, explaining that in order to help, it is first necessary to learn the cause of her barrenness.

CALLIMACO: Ma, a volere adempiere el desiderio vostro, è necessario sapere la cagione della sterilità della donna vostra, perché le possono essere più cagione: nam cause sterilitatis sunt: aut in semine, aut in matrice, aut in instrumentis, aut in virga, aut in cause extrinseca.

NICIA: (*a parte*) Costui è il più degno uomo che si possa trovare!⁵⁸

Here Callimaco switches from an ornamental vernacular style to a specialized medical language, which he further obscures by reciting it in Latin. As intended, Callimaco's use of Latin prevents Nicia from understanding his true meaning—a veiled accusation that the cause of Lucrezia's infertility lies with her husband. Yet for Nicia, Callimaco's use of Latin automatically indicates the worthiness of his proffered diagnosis, and he responds immediately by exclaiming that Callimaco is the most worthy, respectable man that one could find—"il più degno uomo che si possa trovare."⁵⁹ To deepen the implied insult, Callimaco goes even further to suggest that the couple's infertility could be caused by impotence:

CALLIMACO: Potrebbe, oltr'a di questo, causarsi questa sterilità da voi, per impotenzia; che quando questo fussi, non ci sarebbe rimedio alcuno.

NICIA: Impotente io? Oh! voi mi farete ridere! Io non credo che sia el più ferrigno ed il più rubizzo uomo in Firenze di me.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.2. Anselmi translates the Latin into Italian as follows: "Infatti le cause della sterilità sono: o nel seme o nella matrice o negli strumenti seminarii o nel membro o in una causa esterna" (see Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, ed. G.M. Anselmi, 83n13). ("But in order to satisfy your wish, I must know the cause of your wife's sterility, for there can be many causes: *For the causes of sterility are either in the semen, or in the womb, or in the seminal organs, or in the penis, or in an extrinsic cause.*" trans. Gilbert, 787.)

⁵⁹ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.2. ("This is the ablest man there is," trans. Gilbert, 787.)

⁶⁰ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.2. ("Callimaco: Besides these, you could be the cause of this sterility, through impotence; and if that were so, there would be nothing that we could do. / Nicia: Me impotent?

Despite Callimaco's ominous tone and the seriousness of the discussion regarding his wife's health, Nicia deflects with characteristic boastfulness. He finds the suggestion of impotence absurd and claims that there is no more virile man in Florence than him. Nicia's choice of two adjectives strongly associated with virility and strength, coupled with his repeated use of the superlative—"el piú ferrigno ed il piú rubizzo"—signals an attempt to mask the anxieties around his masculinity. His false bravado and boasts of virility therefore work to betray, rather than conceal, his vulnerabilities to his interlocutors, giving Callimaco the opportunity to capitalize on this weakness and to manipulate Nicia's insecurities by playing off his claims of superior sexual potency. In other words, in order to deny his impotence successfully, Nicia must fully embrace the narrative truth of *Lucrezia's* infertility by accepting Callimaco's diagnosis and subsequent prescription of the mandrake potion. Anything less than his complete acceptance could lend credence to the plausibility of his impotence and threaten to expose his deficiencies. When Nicia declares himself the 'toughest' and 'most robust,' Callimaco effectively challenges him to prove his masculinity, even if that means taking steps which permit another man to lie with his wife. In this way, Machiavelli links Nicia's sexual impotence with his inability to protect his wife, two deficiencies that combine to expose Nicia's complete failure as a man in this society.

Nicia's reaction cannot be uncoupled from the social implications surrounding male impotence in the early modern period.⁶¹ Following the Greco-Roman belief in humoral theory,

Why, you make me laugh, I don't believe there is a tougher and healthier man in Florence than I am" trans. Gilbert, 787.)

⁶¹ On the social and cultural significance of impotence in early modern Europe, see Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), in particular chapter 3, "The 'Infirmary of Others': Laughing at Fumblers in Early Modern Europe," 50-76. For an overview of gender relations and sexual culture in the Italian context, see Michael Rocke, "Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London and New York: Longman, 1998), 150-170.

early modern Europeans generally thought that a man's virility was related to his exposure to warm air, which would result in increased sexual appetite and many sons. Laura Giannetti also notes the plethora of sixteenth-century recipe books offering a variety of remedies related to sexual performance and health, including a number of foods purported to have aphrodisiacal properties.⁶² The prevalence of such remedies speaks to the underlying anxieties surrounding male sexual ability and desire, which made it an ideal motif for Renaissance comedy as well.⁶³ It was also accepted as fact that the pleasure of both sexes was an important aspect of conception.⁶⁴ These two beliefs emerge in *Mandragola*, II.6, when Callimaco offers his analysis of Lucrezia's urine sample, which Nicia has just procured for his examination: "Io ho paura che costei non sia la notte mal coperta, e per questo fa l'orina cruda."⁶⁵ Callimaco's sarcastic double entendre suggests that Nicia's inability to satisfy his wife sexually (leaving her 'poorly covered at night') has contributed to her infertility, while also ostensibly alluding to the widespread belief that cold air, due to exposure from a lack of bedclothes, prevented a woman from conceiving.⁶⁶ At the same time, in the context of sixteenth-century Italy an allegation of impotence was a charge that had deeper social meaning and consequences. As Blok has suggested, a man's virility was also connected to his honor and social status.⁶⁷ Given this context, Nicia's reaction in the face of the insinuation of

⁶² Laura Giannetti, "A Satyr in the Kitchen Pantry," in *Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th-17th century)*, ed. Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 104-108.

⁶³ Giannetti's essay focuses in part on Machiavelli's later comedy, *Clizia*, which features a stereotypical aging male lover who turns to such remedies to improve his sexual performance. She mentions the Florentine Donato Giannotto's comedy *Il vecchio amoroso* (c. 1533-1536) as another prime example. See Giannetti, "A Satyr in the Kitchen Pantry," 104. On portrayals of the aging male lover in early modern comedy, see Anthony Ellis, *Old Age, Masculinity, and Early Modern Drama: Comic Elders on the Italian and Shakespearean Stage* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009), in particular 63-72.

⁶⁴ McLaren, *Impotence*, 53.

⁶⁵ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.6. ("I'm afraid she's poorly covered at night, and that makes her pass cloudy urine," trans. Gilbert, 790.)

⁶⁶ McLaren, *Impotence*, 54.

⁶⁷ Blok, "Rams and Billy-Goats": 428-429.

impotency places the general anxieties around masculinity, legitimacy, and power at the forefront of discourses on gender during the Renaissance. To be impotent was to relinquish one's position of masculine domination over women and over other men, who position themselves as rivals in a world of scarce resources. It is notable, then, that the word 'impotent' (in Italian as in English) comes from the Latin *impotens*, meaning powerless, weak, or lacking control. To be impotent was thus the antithesis of what it meant to be a man of *virtù*, to use Machiavelli's famous term—an ideal strongly associated with manliness, strength, wisdom, and power. In political terms, this impotence becomes a metaphor for the weak or ineffectual ruler, who has become so deluded in his self-perception that it renders him powerless, impotent, losing the ability to assert any true claim to authority.

Faced with the possibility of having no heir to carry on his lineage, Nicia is forced to make a decision about the future of his family. Moreover, many children, especially sons, would increase the economic and social standing of the family, establishing the Calfucci as an important family in Florence. Nicia's hesitation thus finally dissolves when Callimaco assures him that there is no surer remedy for infertility than a potion made of mandrake: "Voi avete ad intender questo, che non è cosa più certa ad ingravidare una donna che dargli bere una pozione fatta di mandragola."⁶⁸ For Nicia, the alleged benefits outweigh the risks, of which there are many. In accepting the mandrake remedy, he consents to let his wife sleep with a stranger, who will absorb the potion's dangerous effects and die. Nicia therefore tacitly agrees to sacrifice another man in order to create new life for his personal benefit while also allowing himself to be turned into a cuckold. Though Nicia's ultimate desire will be fulfilled, *Mandragola* shows us that the costs may be too steep.

⁶⁸ "Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.2. ("There's nothing surer to make a woman pregnant than to have her take a medicine made of mandrake," trans. Gilbert, 791.)

In the comedy, the motif of remedy is deeply connected to the theme of sickness—both moral and corporeal—that runs throughout the plot. Impotence, wickedness, stupidity, and selfishness plague the principal characters who seek a cure for their egotistic desires. Yet while the mandrake potion—though it is no more than a clever scheme devised by Ligurio and Callimaco—provides a practical solution to the various dilemmas that arise, it cannot resolve the immorality of those who would use it for their own self-seeking ends. The limitations of their success call to mind Machiavelli’s warning in *Il Principe*, chapter 8: “Non si può ancora chiamare virtù ammazzare e’ suoi cittadini, tradire gli amici, essere senza fede, senza pietà, senza religione: e’ quali modo possono fare acquistare imperio, ma non gloria.”⁶⁹ The well-known line comes from the author’s discussion of the Sicilian tyrant Agathocles, ruler of the kingdom of Siracusa from 316 to 289 BCE, whose brutal tactics earned him a rapid rise to power. Machiavelli appears to make an important distinction with the Agathocles example: that cruelty may indeed be useful, or in his words ‘well-used’ (“bene usate”), but faithlessness and will lead only to infamy. In chapter 8, as Victoria Kahn has noted, we also see a shift in the semantics of that crucial Machiavellian term, *virtù*: often denoting the cunning and strength of the prince, this particular line seems to restore to it a sense of morality that is largely abandoned elsewhere in the text. Thus, Kahn argues, Machiavelli’s example of Agathocles prompts us “to consider not only the relationship between

⁶⁹ Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 82. (“It cannot, however, be called virtue to kill one’s fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be without fidelity, without mercy, without religion; such proceedings enable one to gain sovereignty, but not fame,” trans. Gilbert, 36.) Chapters 7 and 8 are among the most discussed and debated of *Il Principe* because of the juxtaposition between Cesare Borgia, whose vicious tactics Machiavelli praises, and Agathocles, whose cruelty he denounces. In the juxtaposition of these two figures, Machiavelli demonstrates that individual actors may produce diverse outcomes even when deploying the same remedy, dependent upon the context in which it is applied. On the question of Agathocles’s example in the text, see Victoria Kahn, “Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli’s *Prince*,” in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, eds. Albert R. Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 195-217. Kahn revisits the topic in a more recent essay, examining the influence of Sallust’s discussion of Catiline and Caesar on Machiavelli’s interpretation of Agathocles as historical example; see Victoria Kahn, “Revisiting Agathocles,” *The Review of Politics* 75 (2013): 557-572.

virtù and virtue, but also between virtù and success, and success and glory.”⁷⁰ I would argue that in *Mandragola*, Machiavelli returns to this very line of thinking. While Nicia’s quest for influence and power in both the public and private spheres meets with some success, his authority is ultimately undermined by his lack of both *virtù* and virtue. By the play’s end, Nicia has cleared the path towards his ultimate goal: he ostensibly resolves the dilemma of obtaining an heir but has sacrificed his honor by allowing himself to become a cuckold, delegitimizing his own authority and cementing his reputation as a fool. From a Machiavellian perspective, the effective application of remedy must be guided by prudence and *virtù* towards a more civic-minded goal. *Mandragola* thus reveals the corrosivity and ruinousness of individual desire, which threatens to destabilize the common good and weaken the foundations of civil society on the whole.

Machiavelli’s Lucrezia: Visions for a New Imperial Republic

In the past few decades, a number of scholars have turned their attention to the quieter presence in *Mandragola*: the seemingly acquiescent Lucrezia, who is acted upon by others much more than she is seen to take action herself. Her husband, her mother, Callimaco, and even the local friar all conspire upon the body of Lucrezia, using her as a means to the satisfaction of their own desires. Yet despite her initial hesitation towards the mandrake scheme, after a night with Callimaco Lucrezia appears to undergo a transformation, both morally and physically, and in the process, reclaims her own desire:

Poiché l’astuzia tua, la sciocchezza del mio marito, la semplicità di mia madre e la tristizia del mio confessore mi hanno condotto a fare quello che mai per me medesima arei fatto, io voglio giudicare che venga da una celeste disposizione, che abbi voluto così, e non sono sufficiente a recusare quello che ’l Cielo vuole che io accetti. Però io ti prendo per signore, patrone, guida: tu mio padre, tu mio

⁷⁰ Kahn, “Revisiting Agathocles”: 558.

difensore, e tu voglio che sia ogni mio bene; e quel che 'l mio marito
ha volute per una sera, voglio ch'egli abbia per sempre.⁷¹

Here Lucrezia lists the accumulation of forces that compel Lucrezia to yield to Callimaco's advances and to accept the mandrake scheme. Yet after she acknowledges what others have made her do (that which "mi hanno condotto a fare"), we witness a shift in her language to the first person that epitomizes Lucrezia's reclamation of her agency and her will. In the final sentence of this passage in particular, the present indicative verbs *prendo* and *voglio* ('I take' and 'I want,' respectively) emphasize both action and desire; the latter she repeats three separate times, underlining her strength of spirit at this critical juncture in the comedy. It must also be acknowledged that we learn of this change of heart from Callimaco, who reports Lucrezia's words to Ligurio the following day. Thus, while this moment represents a significant shift in her character, we are made to understand that Lucrezia still does not speak for herself: her personhood is still mediated by those around her.

Lucrezia's conversion—or "rebirth," as Nicia characterizes it ("come se tu rinascessi"⁷²)—lies at the heart of the attempts to interpret her position in Machiavelli's thought. In terms of Lucrezia's political valence, Ronald Martinez has shown the significant parallels between Machiavelli's invention and the legendary Lucretia, an important figure in the tumultuous history of ancient Rome.⁷³ Specifically, Martinez argues that the comedy portrays Lucrezia's fall from virtue, that her seduction and conquered will at the hands of Callimaco may be read as an

⁷¹ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, V.4. ("Your cleverness, my husband's stupidity, my mother's folly, and my confessor's rascality have brought me to do what I never would have done myself. So I'm forced to judge that it comes from Heaven's wish that has ordered it so, and I'm not strong enough to refuse what Heaven wills me to accept. I take you then for lord, master, guide; you are my father, you are my defender; I want you as my chief good; and what my husband has asked for one night, I intend him to have always," trans. Gilbert, 819.)

⁷² Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, V.5 ("[It's exactly] as though you were born a second time," trans. Gilbert, 819.)

⁷³ Martinez, "The Pharmacy of Machiavelli": 13-20.

overturning of the ancient virtue exhibited by Roman Lucretia, perhaps as a metaphor for the decline of civic virtue in Machiavelli's Florence.⁷⁴ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin has further suggested that Lucrezia's conversion is instead a marker of her "sensible flexibility," earning Ligurio's praise as one who is "savvia, costumata, ed atta a governare un regno."⁷⁵ Careful readers have observed that this depiction of Lucrezia—as someone whose intelligence and virtue qualify her 'to rule a kingdom'—aligns her character with the qualities Machiavelli extols in *Il Principe*. Juxtaposing the arguments of Martinez, Susan Behuniak-Long also examines the question of Lucrezia's "fall" to argue against the idea that she undergoes a conversion at the play's conclusion, suggesting instead that Lucrezia is a woman of "questionable character" from the very start.⁷⁶ For Behuniak-Long, Lucrezia is not a symbol of fidelity, or freedom, or virtue, but rather a metaphor for fickle Fortuna.⁷⁷

Building on these critical studies, I would like to propose a reevaluation of Lucrezia that takes into consideration *Mandragola*'s emphasis on remedy. As I have argued, the comedy illustrates the negative consequences of a remedy misused for self-interested ends. In this light, the fictitious mandrake potion becomes a metaphor for the impotence and ineffectiveness of Nicia, who must rely on a mythical medicine to solve his familial dilemma. While Nicia may ultimately obtain an heir, Machiavelli implies that his desperation and folly has led him to accept a child that

⁷⁴ Martinez, "The Pharmacy of Machiavelli": 20.

⁷⁵ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 47-48, cit. 47; Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, I.3. ("[wise], courteous, and fit to rule a kingdom," trans. Gilbert, 783.) I would note that Gilbert translates the Italian "savvia" as "virtuous"; I have adjusted the translation to capture the more literal meaning of the word, which I believe underscores an essential quality of this character as an astute and adaptable figure.

⁷⁶ Susan Behuniak-Long, "The Significance of Lucrezia in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*," *The Review of Politics* 51.2 (1989): 264-280, cit. 265.

⁷⁷ The figure of Fortuna, which Machiavelli compares to a woman in *Il Principe*, chapter 25 ("la fortuna è donna, et è necessario, volendola tenere sotto, batterla e urtarla"). Pitkin's influential book on Machiavelli's gender politics takes its name from this passage (*Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in Machiavelli's Thought*).

is not his own. Callimaco, too, is shown to be a rather weak and suggestible figure—misguided by his passions, he leans on others’ designs in order to satisfy his desire for a married woman. While these men conspire against her, Lucrezia finds a way to adopt the remedy to protect her position—not because of an inherent corruptness, nor in a final moment of total capitulation, but as the result of her own shrewdness and foresight.

In line with the other examinations of her character, my understanding of Lucrezia’s final transformation is informed by Livy’s account of the rape of Lucretia at the hands of Sextus Tarquinius and her subsequent suicide. According to the Roman historian, Sextus Tarquinius heard tell of Lucretia’s superior virtue and travelled with a group of men, including Lucretia’s husband, to witness her virtuousness firsthand. During this visit, Tarquinius began to nurture an intense passion for Lucretia and decided to act upon it. Traveling back to her home some days later, he visited Lucretia in her room and, brandishing a knife, demanded that she have sex with him or be killed. Lucretia was not intimidated by the threat of death, so Tarquinius moved to exploit her fear of dishonor by threatening to kill her and a slave together, so that it would look like Lucretia had committed adultery with an inferior. In the face of such a threat, Lucretia yielded to Tarquinius’s ultimatum. When he finally left, she confessed everything to her husband and father, then killed herself as the final proof of her honor.

In Livy’s *Ab urbe condita* (also known as the *History of Rome*, composed c. 29-9 BCE), the legend serves as the founding myth for the Roman Republic, as Lucretia’s dying wish called for her husband and father to avenge her honor by overthrowing the Roman king. Mary offers additional context for this mythologizing tale, explaining that “assaults on women symbolically [marked] the beginning and end of the regal period. What is more, the Roman writers who later told the story were probably influenced by Greek traditions, which often linked the culmination,

and fall, of tyranny with sexual crimes.”⁷⁸ In Roman moral culture, Lucretia’s story signified the epitome of female virtue, a legacy which carried on through the Italian Middle Ages into the Renaissance. At the same time, the rape of Lucrezia is also a deeply political moment in Roman history: it ignited the downfall of the monarchy and paved the way for the free Roman Republic. Lucretia’s suffering as a catalyst for transformation that culminated in liberty. Yet the Republic proved to be a violent era in its own right, eventually giving way to a more stable Roman Empire—leading to the so-called *Pax Romana*, two centuries of relative peace and prosperity that began with the accession of Caesar Augustus in 27 BCE.⁷⁹ It is important to recognize that while the *Res publica romana* was, too, a volatile period, it was also a moment that saw Rome’s expansion toward a Mediterranean hegemony through a series of wars that spanned the duration of the Republican era.

It is noteworthy, then, that fifteen centuries later, Machiavelli would choose the name of *Lucrezia* for the female protagonist of *Mandragola*, thereby evoking an iconography that had long been associated with loyalty, freedom, and pro-republican sentiment.⁸⁰ The parallels between Livy’s account of the rape of Lucretia and the *Mandragola* plot are thus significant to our understanding of the comedy. Like her Roman counterpart, Lucrezia’s fate becomes fundamentally interconnected to male desire, incited by her beauty and virtue. As in Livy’s account, Machiavelli’s Florentine Lucrezia is coerced into a scheme that threatens her chastity and honor. Yet while Roman Lucretia ultimately succumbs to the ravenous Sextus Tarquinius because he threatens not just death, but her dishonor, Florentine Lucrezia reacts to her current situation by accepting it *willingly*, according to Callimaco’s narration of events. As a result, Lucrezia does not meet her

⁷⁸ Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 121.

⁷⁹ For a useful overview of this period in Rome’s history, see Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, 349-385.

⁸⁰ Martinez, “The Pharmacy of Machiavelli”: 7; Behuniak-Long, “The Significance of Lucrezia”: 66-67.

demise, as she had previously predicted in III.11 —“Io sono contenta: ma io non credo mai essere viva domattina!”⁸¹ In this line, we may read an allusion to Roman Lucretia’s legendary death, which reveals an inherent ambivalence underlying her accession. Building on the work of scholars Naomi Rothman and Shimul Melwani, who argue that experiencing mixed emotions may lead to an increase in cognitive flexibility and adaptive decision making, I would like to suggest that Lucrezia’s emotional ambivalence here illustrates her ability to understand the competing desires of those around her and adapt according to her own best interests.⁸²

In other words, although she submits to the will and desires of others, Machiavelli’s Lucrezia ultimately triumphs not by way of a sacrificial suicide, but by manipulating the outcome of the situation: in the play’s denouement, we discover that she chooses to accept her fate—an indication of strength, rather than weakness—and appears even to embrace and use it *to her advantage*. Her inability to conceive children with her husband threatens her status within her own family, even as the comedy implies that it is Nicia’s impotence that causes their childlessness. Nicia makes this clear to Lucrezia in II. 5, when he coerces her into providing a urine sample for analysis as part of the mandrake scheme. Frustrated with Lucrezia’s apparent infertility, he reproaches her: “Se credevo non avere figliuoli, io arei preso piú tosto per moglie una Contadina che te.”⁸³ Here Nicia reminds his wife of her inferior and inherently precarious position within the

⁸¹ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, III.11. (“I consent; but I don’t believe that I shall be alive at all tomorrow morning,” trans. Gilbert, 803.)

⁸² See Naomi B. Rothman and Shimul Melwani, “Feeling Mixed, Ambivalent, and in Flux: The Social Functions of Emotional Complexity for Leaders,” *Academy of Management Review* 42.2 (2016): 259-282.

⁸³ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.5. (“If I’d thought I wasn’t going to have children, I’d sooner have married a country girl,” trans. Gilbert, 789.) Both Gilbert and Flaumenhaft suggest that the line may be spoken *sottovoce*, rather than addressed directly to Lucrezia. In the Italian edition by Anselmi, Nicia’s line is preceded by stage directions that read “(verso l’interno, rivolgendosi a Lucrezia)” [towards the inside of the house, speaking to Lucrezia]. I would also point to the use of the tonic pronoun as evidence of Nicia’s intended intimidation (“io arei preso piú tosto per moglie una Contadina *che te*,” my emphasis), which both Gilbert and Flaumenhaft ignore in their translations. See Gilbert, *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*,

patriarchal paradigm. Her primary duty is to produce children for her husband, which reduces her personhood to the capacities of her physical body. If she fails to fulfill this obligation, she is stripped of her value as a woman and wife. In this line, Nicia also emphasizes Lucrezia's interchangeability: a simple peasant woman would have more value, if she were only able to provide him with an heir. Finally, her very presence within the play further underscores this subordination: though she is the central focus of the plot, we only encounter her on stage in four out of *Mandragola's* thirty-seven scenes.⁸⁴

Moreover, at the moment of Callimaco's revelation in her bed—in his words, “ch'io ebbi dato ad intendere l'amore che io le portavo, e quanto facilmente, per la semplicità del marito, noi potavamo viver felici senza infamia alcuna”⁸⁵—Lucrezia faces a dilemma similar to that presented to Roman Lucretia at the moment of her rape. Livy writes:

When all was quiet, [Sextus Tarquinius] drew his sword and made his way to Lucretia's room determined to rape her. She was asleep. Laying his left hand on her breast, 'Lucretia,' he whispered, 'not a sound! I am Sextus Tarquinius. I am armed—if you utter a word, I will kill you.' Lucretia opened her eyes in terror; death was imminent, no help at hand. Sextus urged his love, begged her to submit, pleaded, threatened, used every weapon that might conquer a woman's heart. But all in vain, not even the fear of death could bend her will. 'If death will not move you,' Sextus cried, 'dishonour shall. I will kill you first, then cut the throat of a slave and lay his naked body by your side. Will they not believe that you have been caught in adultery with a servant—and paid the price?' Lucretia yielded. Sextus enjoyed her, and rode away, proud of his success.⁸⁶

vol. 2, 789n1, as well as Mera J. Flaumenhaft, *Mandragola* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1981), 23n39.

⁸⁴ These scenes are: III.10, III.11, V.5, V.6. Behuniak-Long provides a comprehensive account of Lucrezia's appearances in “The Significance of Lucrezia”: 267-268.

⁸⁵ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, V.4. (“[But then I made myself known to her and] made her understand my love for her, and how easily, because her husband is so stupid, we could live in happiness without any scandal,” trans. Gilbert, 818.)

⁸⁶ Livy, *The Early History of Rome: Books I-V of The History of Rome from its Foundation*, trans. Aubrey De Sélincourt (London: Penguin, 2002), 98-99.

In this passage, Sextus Tarquinius weaponizes Lucretia's virtue, her most precious quality. When his words failed him—Livy notes that he “urged,” “begged,” “pleaded,” and “threatened” her—Sextus resorts to violence to force her to submit. Yet Lucretia's honor transcends his brutality: death does not intimidate her. It is only when he threatens to dishonor her in death by staging a scene that would impinge upon her good name and destroy her integrity that Lucrezia yields to Sextus's demands for her body. Her subsequent suicide is thus her final attempt at reclaiming her righteousness.

In *Mandragola*, Lucrezia too understands that her honor is at stake, but more significantly, if she does not produce an heir for her husband Nicia, she will become superfluous, expendable, and ultimately, discarded. In the comedy, it seems that her honor is also tied to her status as a wife and mother: without a child, she risks losing her place within her family, and Nicia makes it clear that he is willing to jeopardize her moral position in order to establish his lineage and solidify his place in Florentine society. Callimaco too poses a threat to Lucrezia's security; regardless of his intentions, he holds the same power over her that Sextus Tarquinius held over Roman Lucretia. Ligurio makes sure to remind an anxious Callimaco of his authority in this affair, telling him to explain to Lucrezia “come senza sua infamia la può esser tua amica, e con sua grande infamia tua nimica.”⁸⁷ Though Callimaco later reports Lucrezia's great satisfaction with him—“avendo ella, oltre alle vere ragioni, gustato che differenza è dalla ghiacitura mia a quella di Nicia, e da e baci d'uno amante giovane a quelli d'uno marito vecchio”⁸⁸—Ligurio's menacing pronouncement lingers, shaping our perception of Callimaco and Lucrezia's night together. Despite the enjoyment

⁸⁷ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, IV.2. (“[Show her] that without disgrace she can be your friend, and with great disgrace your enemy,” trans. Gilbert 808.)

⁸⁸ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, V.4. (“Besides my sound reasons, too, she felt what a difference there is between the way I lie with her and the way Nicia does, and between the kisses of a young lover and those of an old husband,” trans. Gilbert, 819.)

Lucrezia might have derived from him, or her happiness at the prospect of a young lover to substitute her aging husband, Callimaco retained a level of control over the circumstances (and Lucrezia's body) that denied her full agency in the moment.

When Callimaco offers her a solution not only to her childlessness but to her marital dissatisfaction—claiming that no one will be the wiser—Lucrezia appears to accept it as Divine Providence (again, as Callimaco tells us). Yet Lucrezia has always had a mind of her own, as Behuniak-Long has underlined.⁸⁹ In II.2, Nicia claims Lucrezia would be unwilling to go to the baths because she does not like to leave Florence.⁹⁰ In a subsequent scene (II.5), he chastises her for her willfulness (“Io ho fatto d’ogni cosa a tuo modo: di questo vo’ io che tu facci a mio”) and complains to his servant of Lucrezia’s stubborn reluctance to provide him with a sample of her urine ‘for analysis’ as part of Ligurio and Callimaco’s mandrake scheme.⁹¹ Finally, in III.2, Nicia recounts to Ligurio that Lucrezia used to be a sweet, compliant wife—“Ella era la piú dolce persona del mondo e la piú facile”—until she was harassed by several priests (“fratacchioni”) during her regular visits to mass to pray for a child.⁹² Nicia’s use of the pejorative *fratacchioni*, which Gilbert translates as “nasty friars,” suggests a menacing, avaricious sort of clergyman, who may have seen Lucrezia’s pious devotions as an opportunity to prey on her vulnerabilities.⁹³ Nicia

⁸⁹ Behuniak-Long, “The Significance of Lucrezia”: 268-269.

⁹⁰ “Sarebbeci egli altro remedio che bagni? Perché io non vorrei quel disagio, e la donna uscirebbe di Firenze mal volentieri,” Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.2. (“Isn’t there some other cure than baths? Because I don’t want that bother, and my wife doesn’t like going away from Florence,” trans. Gilbert, 787.)

⁹¹ “Quanta fatica ho io durata a fare che questa mia mona sciocca mi dia questo segno!” Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, II.5. (“I’ve always done things your way; now I want you to do them in mine [...] What trouble I’ve gone through to make this silly woman give me this specimen!” trans. Gilbert, 789-790.)

⁹² Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, III.2. (“She used to be the sweetest person in the world and the most accommodating,” trans. Gilbert, 794).

⁹³ The *Lessicografia dell’Accademia della Crusca* offers a definition of the term *fratacchione* (“frate paffuto, grassotto, carnacciuto”) that underscores the physicality of these friars, and in particular their corpulence. Given that friars were most often members of the medicant orders, a brother who was especially fleshy was a likely indication of his moral corruption, or at least that seems to be Machiavelli’s (and Nicia’s) intent. See “Fratacchione,” *Lessicografia dell’Accademia della Crusca*. Online.

http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=FRATACCHIONE_ed3.

seems to understand the incident as a turning point in her disposition, but in the larger context of the comedy, the anecdote also informs us that Lucrezia has much experience in recognizing others' self-serving schemes when they threaten her honor. Such encroachments have the effect of transforming her from what other characters view as a docile woman to one who is capable of pursuing her own ends.

As we learn from Callimaco's report in V.4, Lucrezia does not perish the morning after, but is instead transfigured, having now secured for her family a child and heir, and for herself a strapping young lover. In V.5, Nicia specifically addresses her changed nature by comparing her to a fighting cock ("La pare un gallo!") and states that it is 'as if she were reborn' ("come se tu rinascessi"); in the same lines, Nicia also describes her as 'very audacious' ("molto ardita") and her mother too agrees that she seems 'changed' ("Ella è un poco alterata").⁹⁴ Having taken matters into her own hands, Lucrezia emerges from her predicament a new and powerful woman: she has learned how to use the desires of men to unlock her own agency. Through this process of revitalization, Machiavelli posits Lucrezia as a woman of action; whereas Roman Lucretia must die in order for others to incite revolution, in *Mandragola*, it is Florentine Lucrezia herself who becomes the catalyst for a new order. She embodies the qualities of prudence, foresight, and adaptability—the essential elements of Machiavellian *virtù*—over idealized notions of self-sacrifice. As Machiavelli writes in *Il Principe*, chapter 25, the trait of adaptability in particular allows one to adjust to the whims of Fortune:

Nondimanco, perché il nostro libero arbitrio non sia spento, iudico
potere essere vero che la fortuna sia arbitra della metà delle azioni

⁹⁴ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, V.5. ("She acts like a fighting cock"; "it's exactly as though you were born a second time"; "You're very lively this morning"; "she is a bit indignant," trans. Gilbert, 819-820.) Gilbert interprets the meaning of the adjective 'alterata' in a more negative sense, assuming that to act as a "gallo" ('fighting cock') is to be angered and annoyed. I would offer a more literal meaning, "changed," based on the root verb, *alterare* ("muovere, o mutare una cosa dall'esser suo," cit. *Lessicografia dell'Accademia della Crusca*. Online. http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=ALTERARE_ed1).

nostre, ma che *etiam* lei ne lasci governare l'altra metà, o presso, a noi [...] cioè che quell principe, che si appoggia tutto in su la fortuna, rovina come quella varia. Credo ancora che sia felice quello che riscontra il modo del procedure suo con la qualità de' tempi: e similmente sia infelice quello che con il procedure suo si discordano e' tempi.⁹⁵

In a similar line of thought, Frank Fata has argued that Lucrezia embodies the ideal Machiavellian prince, arguing that “we come to understand how through intelligence, cunning, and will Madonna Lucrezia transformed weakness into strength, dependence into dominance.”⁹⁶ Lucrezia does not succumb to the will(s) of others, but rather through the activation of her own innate ability, Fata asserts, she achieves a level of autonomy. In other words, when Fortune intervenes, Lucrezia's *virtù* enables her to fulfill the Machiavellian ideal of the adaptive and forward-thinking leader.

I would like to expand this idea to reflect on Lucrezia's appropriation of the mandrake, a remedy that was initially forced upon her by her husband through the success of Callimaco's deception. Martinez notes the centrality of *mandragola* to the plot, a *pharmakon* of “ambivalent efficacy” that reveals the true meaning of Lucrezia's transformation in act V.⁹⁷ For Martinez, Lucrezia's change is ignited by through her encounter with a healthy male who will generate the next generation in her womb: “By submitting to Callimaco and the ‘miraculous’ power of his sex, she becomes a powerful, even commanding figure [...] In terms of the lore of *mandragola*, Callimaco's night with Lucrezia has drawn the imaginary toxicity from her body into himself; she, in return, has retained his seed and, in effect, his masculine potency.”⁹⁸ I would offer a feminist

⁹⁵ Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 198-200. (“Nonetheless, in order not to annul our free will, I judge it true that Fortune may be mistress of one half our actions but that even she leaves the other half, or almost, under our control [...] [thus] any prince who relies exclusively on Fortune falls when she varies. I believe also that a prince succeeds who adapts his way of proceeding to the nature of the times, and conversely one does not succeed whose procedure is out of harmony with the times,” trans. Gilbert, 90.)

⁹⁶ Fata, “Machiavellian Strategies in *Mandragola*,” 99.

⁹⁷ Martinez, “The Pharmacy of Machiavelli,” 39.

⁹⁸ Martinez, “The Pharmacy of Machiavelli,” 39.

alternative to this reading: rather than being transformed by the inefficient and self-interested men who desire only her body (or womb), Lucrezia co-opts the mandrake scheme for herself, using its potency to obtain what she herself desires. Though she is subject to the impulses of these men, Lucrezia ultimately triumphs by controlling the outcome of this situation—much like her Roman antecedent sought to do by her suicide. As Martinez suggests, Lucrezia does not surrender to the mandrake's toxic nature. Instead, she adapts to the variations of Fortune and subsequently adopts the remedy as her own. Her appropriation of the mandrake remedy underscores the toxicity of their own cure, for these two men cannot quite overcome their own limitations in order to act as independent agents of their own desires. By the play's conclusion, she is newly revived, ushering in an enlightened regime in which her superior character reigns over the short-sighted desperation of Nicia and Callimaco.

In this light, Lucrezia becomes the vehicle for Machiavelli's re-imaging of Livy's Roman founding mythology, through which he offers his vision for a new Italian republic—one with imperial aspirations inspired by both the territorial expansionism of the Roman Republic and by the *Pax Romana* of the Empire, guided by the principles of Machiavellian *virtù*: shrewdness, strength, and most importantly, adaptability. In the play, Lucrezia's *virtù* gives rise to new life and hope for the future, as she will give birth to the next generation imbued with the promise of change. Indeed, in creating the world of *Mandragola*, Machiavelli did not envision his comedy for a wider public—it was intended to be seen by the next generation of Italian leaders.⁹⁹ Through Lucrezia's final triumph, Machiavelli reclaims the nobility, agency, and revolutionary power of her Roman

⁹⁹ Flaumenhaft, *Mandragola*, 3-4. For an examination of Machiavelli's vision for a new generation of civic-minded young Florentines, see also John P. McCormick, "Tempering the *Grandi*'s Appetite to Oppress: The Dedication and Intention of Machiavelli's *Discourses*," in *Politics and the Passions, 1500-1850*, eds. Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, and Daniela Coli (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 7-29.

antecedent to offer a path forward for a devastated and divided Italy, to be forged by those promising young aristocrats like Cosimo Rucellai and Zanobi Buondelmonti, whom Machiavelli considered *att[i] a governare un regno*. If we understand the comedy's conclusion not as an act of submission, but as a revival—or rebirth, to echo Nicia's assessment—Lucrezia becomes the model for the next generation of Florentine leaders to imitate, the embodiment of the imperial republican ruler to which they might aspire.

Chapter Two: Machiavelli's Teleology of Spectacle in *Clizia* (1525)

A derisu non procul abest risus.

—Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*

In March 1525, the Florentine patrician Filippo de' Nerli wrote a letter to his friend Francesco del Nero to share some recent gossip about a mutual friend:

Given that el Machia [Machiavelli] is a relative of yours and a very good friend of mine, I cannot refrain from taking this occasion that you have given me to write to you and to commiserate with you about the things that I am hearing daily about him... And if it were not for the great, virtually terrible events that are happening in this poor region [of Modena] which have given people other things to talk about than gossip, I am certain that no one would be talking about anything else besides him.¹

In the spring of 1525, the new source of gossip was Niccolò Machiavelli's well-known, and indeed well-documented, affair with a much younger woman, Barbara Raffacani Salutati, better known by her stage name 'Barbara Fiorentina,' who was an established singer, poet, and possible courtesan.² As Machiavelli was long married to his wife Marietta di Luigi Corsini, the affair between Machiavelli and 'Barbara fiorentina' was a fascinating piece of gossip at the time and, as

¹ Filippo de' Nerli to Francesco del Nero, 1 March 1525, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, ed. Franco Gaeta, 3:54, n. 8, as quoted and translated in Guido Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2.

² There exist several historical accounts of this affair. Machiavelli appears to have met Barbara Salutati in 1524 (the year prior to *Clizia*'s composition) and continued to frequent the same social circles in subsequent years. Of particular note are his letters with his friend Francesco Guicciardini, who teases Machiavelli about his relationship with Barbara. Roberto Ridolfi provides a detailed portrayal of the relationship in his seminal *Vita di Machiavelli* (Rome: Angelo Belardetti Editore, 1954), translated by Cecil Grayson as *Life of Niccolò Machiavelli* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); see in particular 207-211. Ridolfi's sources, in part, consist of these letters, including those from Barbara Salutati herself. Christopher Celenza also provides a thorough account of the affair in *Machiavelli: A Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); in particular 154-6. For a similar account, see also Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love*, 1-4.

Nerli's letter demonstrates, a notable topic in the correspondence of their circle.³ Indeed the Florentine statesman and humanist was a man who suffered from inappropriate amorous passions, much like Nicomaco, the antagonist of Machiavelli's 1525 comedy, *Clizia*. Indeed, as critics have noted throughout the centuries, the two even share the same name: it seems no coincidence that *Clizia*'s disgraced *senex amans* bears a nearly identical name to the comedy's playwright ('Nicomaco' forming an abbreviated version of *Nicco-lò Mach-iavelli*).

The gossip itself recounted how the married Machiavelli, already in his mid-fifties, had pursued "yet another adulterous passion" for the beautiful, and apparently much younger, Barbara Salutati.⁴ The affair was apparently so scandalous that it had threatened to overtake the talk in Modena, competing with the French defeat at the Battle of Pavia as a topic of discussion. Exaggeration aside, what emerges from Nerli's correspondence is his implied concern for Francesco del Nero's reputation. Nerli begins by underlining Nero's kinship with Machiavelli, whose wife, Marietta, was Nero's half-sister through their mother, Ginevra.⁵ When Nerli explains that he is writing to Nero first and foremost because Machiavelli "is a relative," he reveals his

³ Filippo de' Nerli was a noted frequenter of the Orti Oricellari, the Rucellai family gardens where Machiavelli, Bernardo and Giovanni Rucellai, and many others gathered to debate a wide range of topics, from history and politics to philosophy, art, and literature. Felix Gilbert's account of the Orti Oricellari meetings, which lasted until 1512 when the Medici regained control of Florence after a long period of exile, is an excellent source on the history and cultural impact of these meetings. See Felix Gilbert, "Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricellari: A Study on the Origin of Modern Political Thought," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 12 (1949): 101-131.

⁴ Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love*, 2. Richard Andrews tells us that Barbara likely sang the madrigals in the first staging of the comedy (see Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 55. Ridolfi also offers a description of the first performance, which took place on 13 January 1524/1525 at the home of Machiavelli's friend, Jacopo di Filippo Falconetti; see Ridolfi, *The Life of Machiavelli*, 207-10.

⁵ The *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* recounts that Francesco del Nero's mother, Ginevra, was first married to Ludovico Corsini; the marriage produced one daughter, Marietta. Upon Ludovico Corsini's death, Ginevra remarried Piero di Francesco del Nero, and had a son, Francesco, in 1487. See Vanna Arrighi, "Del Nero, Francesco," in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 38 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1990). Accessed online. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-del-nero_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-del-nero_(Dizionario-Biografico)).

concern for the family's good name in light of Machiavelli's well-known adulterous exploits. In other words, the widespread gossip about their mutual friend threatened not only Machiavelli's and Marietta's reputation, but Francesco del Nero's as well.

It is no surprise, then, that interpretations of the comedy have often pointed to a connection between Machiavelli's personal tribulations and the plot of *Clizia*. In this comedy, the wizened and weary matriarch, Sofronia, has become fed up with her husband Nicomaco's lustful and inappropriate pursuits of the young Clizia, a foundling in the family's care. To mitigate Nicomaco's shameful behavior, Sofronia turns to drastic measures in order to use the threat of shame to her advantage. Through the orchestration of a scandal of her own design, she creates a spectacle out of Nicomaco by turning him into the laughingstock of his household; in consequence, she succeeds in protecting the family's honor and its future prosperity from the threat of ruin posed by her husband's self-serving and misguided desires. Importantly, Nicomaco's eventual shaming produces a mis-en-abyme of spectacle: his ridicule is entertainment for his household on stage *and* for the members of the audience, all of whom watch gleefully as Nicomaco makes a fool of himself with a cross-dressed servant boy. When Nicomaco realizes that everyone is laughing at him—and here, one can imagine the laughter of the spectators echoing the laughter of the family and servants on stage—he suffers a great shame (“la gran vergogna”) and through this dishonor is finally purged of his foolish desires.⁶ Thus *Clizia* is comedy about the teleology of spectacle and the power of shame, which coalesce into a compelling and self-reflexive dramatization of Machiavelli's own senescence—and perhaps foretell of his redemption as well.

⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Clizia*, ed. Gian Mario Anselmi (Milan: Mursia, 1984), V.2. References are to act and scene. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *Clizia*, trans. Allan Gilbert, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, vol. 2 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989). Citations of Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, where they occur in this chapter, also come from the same edition and translation.

Though less widely studied than Machiavelli's wildly popular *Mandragola* (c. 1518), *Clizia* has attracted a fair amount of critical attention in the last fifty years. Salvatore Di Maria offers a useful and succinct summary of the various threads of inquiry that have arisen from this renewed consideration of Machiavelli's final play, which he locates with Luigi Rossi's study of the comedy in 1939.⁷ Indeed, it was Rossi who pointed to the play's "psychological realism" and its "dramatization of human suffering" which led the way to more autobiographical interpretations.⁸ Readings that point to the author's biography underscore the fact that *Clizia* was composed and staged just two years before Machiavelli's death in 1527, and so the comedy has been read as "valedictory work," to borrow the words of Ronald Martinez, who offers a reading the play vis-à-vis its chronological position in Machiavelli's oeuvre. For Martinez, *Clizia* is a "dark comedy," a representative of the author's fundamental cynicism, in which Nicomaco's ultimate failure functions as a metaphor for the author's "sober meditation on male ambition and power—virtù—and its limits."⁹ Respected Machiavelli biographer Roberto Ridolfi offers a more sober view, suggesting that by the time he set about composing *Clizia*, Machiavelli himself was in a state of decline, both in terms of his age and his work,¹⁰ mirroring Nicomaco's own moral and physical deterioration on the stage. Thus, some scholars have focused on the play's moral overtones, while others read *Clizia* as an allegory of the purging of corruption linked to the ideas espoused by the author in his political works.¹¹ This view might be best summarized by Patricia Vilches's

⁷ Salvatore Di Maria, "Nicomaco and Sofronia: Fortune and Desire in Machiavelli's *Clizia*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 14.2 (1983), 201-202; Cfr. Luigi Russo, *Commedie fiorentine del '500* (Florence: Sansoni, 1939), 81.

⁸ Di Maria, "Nicomaco and Sofronia," 201.

⁹ Ronald Martinez, "Benefit of Absence: Machiavellian Valediction in *Clizia*," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, eds. Albert Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 117-144, cit. 118.

¹⁰ Roberto Ridolfi, *Studi sulle commedie di Machiavelli* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi Editori, 1968), 142.

¹¹ See, for example, Nino Borsellino, "Per una storia delle commedie di Machiavelli," *Cultura e scuola* 33-34 (1970): 229-241; Luigi Vanossi, "Machiavelli," *Lingua e strutture del teatro italiano del Rinascimento*,

assessment that *Clizia* functions as “a kind of Machiavellian palimpsest, a return to the venerable past that is articulated on top of Machiavelli’s own writings.”¹² These readings tend to see the comedy’s denouement as evidence of Machiavelli’s belief that corruption can, in fact, be cleansed from the diseased body politic.¹³ More recently, critical interpretations have focused on the comedy’s revelations regarding marriage, sex, masculinity, and motherhood, illustrating the ways in which *Clizia* both enacts and challenges certain socio-cultural beliefs surrounding these topics.¹⁴

This chapter aims to build on these foundational studies by focusing more exclusively on the social power of shame, the ‘remedy’ so skillfully deployed by Sofronia as a cure for Nicomaco’s corruption. Indeed, shame appears as the narrative prime mover: Sofronia’s fear of it causes her to take drastic action against her husband, and Nicomaco’s experience of it in the comedy’s final act causes a purgation of his folly and a renewal of his commitment to his family and his duty. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which shame and ridicule are deployed in the comedy as a means of coercion and control, and how Sofronia—as a wife and mother in a

ed. Gianfranco Folena (Padua: Liviana, 1970), 62-108; Giulio Ferroni, “*Mutazione*” e “*riscontro*” nel teatro di Machiavelli e altri saggi sulla commedia del Cinquecento (Rome: Bulzoni, 1972), 102-137; Patricia Vilches, “The Mask in the Mirror: Nicomaco as Imprudent Ruler-Prince in the *Clizia*,” in *Seeking Real Truths: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Machiavelli*, eds. Patricia Vilches and Gerald Seaman (Leiden, Boston: BRILL, 2007), 219-244; Lorenzo Fabbri, “Early Modern Media Theory: Comedy and Government in Machiavelli’s *Clizia*,” *MLN* 134.1 (2019): 65-83.

¹² Patricia Vilches, “The Mask in the Mirror: Nicomaco as Imprudent Ruler-Prince in the *Clizia*,” 240.

¹³ Ferroni offers a notable dissent, arguing that, on the contrary, *Clizia*, and the character of Nicomaco in particular, provide evidence that Machiavelli lost his faith in his own worldview. He writes, “In effetti, incarnandosi in Nicomaco, il «savio» machiavelliano ha perso la propria sicurezza e la propria fiducia in sé, avvertendo una «crisi» della propria «prudenza»: è costretto allora a scoprire che i presupposti teorico-mitici della «mutazione» e del «riscontro» non trovano più appigli nel reale”; Ferroni, “*Mutazione*” e “*riscontro*” nel teatro di Machiavelli, 118.

¹⁴ Several more recent studies that have informed my thinking on this play are: Robert Faulkner “Clizia and the Enlightenment of Private Life,” in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works*, ed. Vickie B. Sullivan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 30-50; Laura Giannetti, “The Satyr in the Kitchen Pantry,” in *Cuckholdry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th–17th century)*, ed. Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 103-124; Yael Manes, “Replacing the Father: Negotiating Motherhood and the Battle for Authority in Machiavelli’s *Clizia* (1525),” in *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities in Sixteenth-Century Italian Comedy* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 43-64; as well as Martinez, “Benefit of Absence.”

patriarchal society—coopts the threat of humiliation to her advantage. From a socio-cultural perspective, *Clizia* is a play about appearances, and more specifically, reveals how the social and economic order of Renaissance society revolved around the cultural concepts of honor, reputation (both personal and familial), and public opinion. Through the development of what we might call a Machiavellian ‘teleology of spectacle,’ *Clizia* portrays public shame as one successful remedy for mitigating social dysfunction in private as well as public spaces. I begin with an overview of the comedy’s historical contexts and its connection to Machiavelli’s discourse on the function and utility of spectacle. Next, I examine the themes of love and lovesickness in the play and how they connect to a broader discussion of the loss of self, where I find a significant correlation to two other important works of the Italian literary tradition: Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* and Dante’s *Inferno*. I will then expand this discussion by turning more fully to the play itself through an investigation of several key scenes to examine how ridicule functions as a powerful agent of change. In *Clizia*, shame becomes a restorative force for Nicomaco and through the staging of an old man’s dishonor, perhaps for the playwright as well. Through these analyses, I ultimately arrive at a conclusion about the self-reflexivity of Machiavelli’s theater and how the playwright himself may have reclaimed the power of shame as a remedy for his own personal folly.

Clizia on Stage and in Life

Machiavelli composed what would be his final comedy in 1525, staged soon thereafter at the home of his friend, the wealthy Jacopo di Filippo Falconetti (known as *il Fornaciaio*), who had commissioned the play in honor of his upcoming return to Florence. Like Machiavelli, Falconetti had too been living in exile, presumably for political motivations, although unlike the author, Falconetti’s banishment was only provisional; after five years, he was permitted to return

and orchestrated a series of festivities, including Machiavelli's newest commission, to celebrate this homecoming.¹⁵ Originally asked to stage a performance of the wildly popular *Mandragola* in honor of Falconetti's return, Machiavelli offered instead to present a new comedy for the occasion. Pressed for time, according to Ridolfi, Machiavelli instead chose to rework ancient Roman source material rather than invent anew, selecting Plautus's *Casina* in part because its subject matter reflected the author's own amorous situation.¹⁶ Machiavelli may also have chosen *Casina* due to its popularity at the time, which led to many vernacular renditions beginning at the turn of the century. Regardless of his possible motivations, *Clizia* is not a mere act of translation, but rather comes to embody the concept of *imitatio*,¹⁷ that process of textual borrowing integral to the literary production of the Renaissance, in order to arrive at a nuanced, even self-referential, adaptation suited for a particular Florentine audience. The two plots are very similar indeed:¹⁸ Both comedies present a father and son who become romantic rivals, for they are infatuated with the same young girl, an orphan of unknown lineage who was raised in their home, and both feature a wife who discovers her husband's plan to marry the girl to a stand-in of the husband's choosing, who will

¹⁵ Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 55-56; see also Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Grayson, 207-210; and Aldo Borlenghi, ed., *Commedie del Cinquecento*, vol. 1 (Milan: Rizzoli, 1959), 23-24.

¹⁶ Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, 208.

¹⁷ As Martin McLaughlin asserts, the concept of *imitatio*—the imitation of classical and vernacular texts—was one of the most significant, and indeed dominant, critical and creative principles in Italian Renaissance literature. More specifically, the act of rhetorical imitation denotes the process “whereby one writer consciously or unconsciously borrows from another text, and that borrowing effects a significant intertextual echo.” He argues that the “humanist view of imitation” first emerges with Petrarch, and reaches a critical juncture by the mid-Quattrocento, when humanists such as Alberti and Landini successfully translated important ideas about *imitatio* from a Latin context into a vernacular one. Machiavelli would have been educated within the scope of this later, vernacular humanism. See Martin McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), in particular 1-7.

¹⁸ For the important similarities and notable differences between the two plays, see Paolo Trivero, “Dalla ‘Casina’ alla ‘Clizia,’” in *La lingua e le lingue di Machiavelli. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi*, ed. Alessandro Pontremoli (Florence: Olschki, 2001), 197-211; Manes, *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities*, 45.

allow the husband access to the girl as he pleases. In both comedies, the husband's plan is thwarted by his wife, who orchestrates a bed-swap the night of the wedding in order to embarrass her husband, and both conclude happily with the revelation of young girl's parentage and subsequent marriage to the son. While the primary divulgements relate to Machiavelli's modernizations of the source content, Yael Manes has also noted that the playwright repositions the central tensions of the plot. In *Casina*, the principal rivalry is between father and son, whereas in *Clizia*, "the battle of wits, wills, and interests takes place between husband and wife, not between father and son."¹⁹ This shift becomes a key element in understanding the social and moral values interrogated in and by the comedy and reveals the limitations of a patriarchal model of public and private life.

My reading of the play, and of the relationship between Nicomaco and Sofronia in particular, is especially influenced by scholars who look to Renaissance discourses on gender as a primary means for investigating the dynamics of power and subordination. Through this lens, the comedy offers Nicomaco as negative ethical model, underscoring his delusion and failure as a husband, father, and citizen, as part of what Barbara Spackman has called Machiavelli's "final meditation on the conflict between the gendered forces of *virtù* and *fortuna*."²⁰ Manes expands Spackman's arguments to assert that in his plays, Machiavelli extends a critique of masculinity itself, evidenced in his female characters' subversion of patriarchal norms. Through their actions, which often run as counterplots to the schemes of their men, these women—particularly *Mandragola*'s Lucrezia and *Clizia*'s Sofronia—empty "the role of patriarch of any effective meaning outside of the men's own deluded perception."²¹ This results in the patriarchal figure's effectual disempowerment, and in the case of *Clizia*, in an assumption of de facto authority by the

¹⁹ Manes, *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities*, 45.

²⁰ Barbara Spackman, "Machiavelli and gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 223-238, cit. 233.

²¹ Manes, *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities*, 62-64, cit. 63.

matriarch. What Sofronia achieves, in other words, is an inversion of the domestic dynamics of power. By manipulating the social currency of reputation and honor, so often wielded against women by their male relatives, Sofronia is able to regain control of her family's future by wresting it from her deluded and decrepit husband.

A key theme in *Clizia* is thus Nicomaco's status as the 'old man' whose amorous passions are considered inappropriate and misguided at such an advanced stage in life. In sixteenth-century Italian comedy, the *senex amans*, or aging male lover, was a common and recognizable archetype whose popularity served, in part, as a testament to what scholars have recognized as the Renaissance's "preoccupation with gender."²² Nicomaco, "un vecchio tutto pieno d'amore" ("an old man completely filled with love"), as Machiavelli describes him in the prologue, succumbs to these passions and thereby folly threatens to ruin his reputation and destabilize the future prosperity of his household.²³ Notably, the *senex amans* was often the subject of derision or mockery, and so the ridicule that Nicomaco endures at the conclusion of the play also belongs to a long tradition reaching back to classical Roman and Greek theater. It is of interest, then, that Machiavelli would choose a subject that so closely resembled his own troubled affairs. This autobiographical connection appears to indicate the author's persistent concerns about his own

²² I quote Yael Manes, whose monograph, *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities in Sixteenth-Century Italian Comedy*, offers a fascinating treatment of gender and its intersection(s) with "the social, political, and economic realms of the Italian Renaissance" as depicted in Cinquecento comedy (2). In addition to Manes, historical and cultural studies that have informed my understanding of sex, gender, and marriage in Italian Renaissance society include Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, eds., *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London and New York: Longman, 1998); Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari, eds., *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991); Laura Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); and Maggie Günsberg, *Gender and the Italian Stage: From the Renaissance to the present day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), in particular chapters 1-2 (6-87). Anthony Ellis also provides a thoughtful study of the typology in his monograph, *Old Age, Masculinity, and Early Modern Drama: Comic Elders on the Italian and Shakespearean Stage* (Farnham, Surrey UK: Ashgate, 2009).

²³ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, prologue.

senescent virility, a theme that emerges more overtly in a poem addressed to the young Barbara during this same period. In “Alla Barbera,” the poet laments difference in age between his lover and himself and alludes to the freshness of youth that has become his rival for her affections: “Nè doler mi poss’io / di voi ma di me stesso / Poich’io veggo e confesso / come tanta beltade / ama più verde etade” (vv. 8–12).²⁴ The wistful tone and language of these verses evoke the longing and regret that one typically associates with the sonnets of Petrarch, and combined with the allusion to the poet’s old age, conjures the figure of an aging Petrarchan lover.²⁵ The poet also adopts a tone of self-recrimination, blaming himself (“Nè doler mi poss’io / di voi ma *di me stesso*,” my emphasis) for the great desire that has overcome him and inspires such pity (“S’a la mia immensa voglia / fussi il valore conforme, / si desteria pietà la dove or dorme,” vv. 1–3).²⁶ These wistful sentiments surface in *Clizia* as well. In one of the comedy’s six *canzoni* (which were performed at the beginning and end of the play, as well as between acts—allegedly by Barbara Salutati herself), Machiavelli writes again of those old lovers who ought to leave the passionate love affairs to young men: “Quanto in cor giovanile è bello amore, / tanto si disconviene / in chi degli anni suoi passato ha il fiore [...] sí che, o vecchi amorosi, el meglio fora / lasciar la impresa a’ giovinetti

²⁴ Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 1005; also cited in Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, 209. (“I cannot complain of you, but rather of myself, because I see and confess that such beauty must love more tender years.”)

²⁵ Kristin Phillips-Court explores the idea of the Petrarchan lover in Renaissance comedies, an archetype which she defines as a derided figure and “negative ethical model,” “an aging fop who uses courtly love or Petrarchan turns of phrase to seduce the woman he desires,” in her essay “The Petrarchan Lover in Cinquecento Comedy,” *MLN* 125.1 (2010): 117–140, cit. 120. She argues that the comedic Petrarchan lover’s misdirected passion becomes a playful subversion of the ideals of Renaissance self-determination as espoused in Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and later neoplatonic works by Ficino and others. Machiavelli’s use of similar tropes in his own poetry as they relate to his own experience as an aging lover call to mind this analysis.

²⁶ Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 1005. (“If my immense desire were the conforming value / pity would be awakened, where now it sleeps.”)

ardenti.”²⁷ In these lines, youth is closely linked to ardor: for those “giovinetti ardenti” (fiery youths), love becomes beautiful and regenerative, something deserved of praise. It is the opposite for the “vecchi amorosi” (aged lovers), for whom such love transforms into an inappropriate, contemptable thing, as signaled by the author’s use of the verb *disconvenire* (“tanto si disconviene”). Moreover, to have written such words amidst the gossip surrounding the author’s own love affair is rather remarkable. These verses, sung by Machiavelli’s young lover on stage in front of the playwright’s friends and peers, take on a deeply ironic, even sardonic tone. In this light, both the poem and the comedy might equally be read as works of self-deprecation. It is possible that Machiavelli, sensing his own foolishness, wished to posit himself as the object of derision before facing such ridicule at the hands of others by proffering himself as the spectacle.

Banished from participation in governmental affairs and exile to just outside the city walls, Machiavelli had already experienced first-hand the consequences of a loss of status. Thus, while Machiavelli’s choice of subject matter for his latest play suggests a certain inclination towards self-mockery, a darker reading of the comedy reveals its antagonist to be a mirror and a vehicle for the author’s feelings of indignity and exclusion, particularly in his later years. In *Clizia*, then, the Florentine turns his critical gaze upon himself in a radical moment of self-reflection by both embodying and becoming the spectacle that will serve to ‘satisfy’ and ‘stupefy’ his audience, two verbs deeply connected to the power of the visual in Machiavelli’s thought.²⁸ His own folly serves as a negative *exemplum*, which in turn realizes the didactic aim expressed in the play’s prologue:

²⁷ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, canzone between acts II and III. (“By just so much as love is fair in a youthful heart, by so much it beseems not one who has passed the flower of his years... So, you aged lovers, it is best to leave that affair to fiery youths,” trans. Gilbert, 837-838.)

²⁸ The reference is to Chapter 7 of *Il Principe*, regarding the utility of the visually spectacular in earning the good will of the *popolo*. See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. Martina De Febo (Milan: BUR, 2013), 70.

“Sono trovate le commedie, *per giovare e per dilettae alli spettatori*,” my emphasis).²⁹ By offering Nicomaco as authorial stand-in, *Clizia* becomes a self-satirization that gives both the spectators and the playwright an opportunity to laugh at the weaknesses of human nature and benefit from the negative ethical model. Important, then, is the second element of the prologue’s dictate: “Ma, volendo dilettae, è necessario muovere gli spettatori a riso.”³⁰ For Machiavelli, comedies must entertain as well as instruct, and so pleasure and laughter are closely linked to any moral or didactic purpose.

These lines in the prologue appear to be a distillation of that which the author asserted in an earlier treatise on the Florentine language, the *Discorso ovvero Dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua* (c. 1515).³¹ In the *Discorso*, Machiavelli expands on this connection between edification, pleasure, and laughter:

E di questa sorte sono le commedie, perchè, ancora che il fine d’una commedia sia proporre uno specchio d’una vita privata, nondimeno il suo modo del farlo è con certa urbanità, e *con termini che muovano riso*, acciocchè gli uomini correndo a quella dilettaeione, gustino poi l’esempio utile, che vi è sotto (my emphasis).³²

Here, Machiavelli defines comedy as a means of social criticism, a form whose objective (*fine*) is to offer a glimpse of ‘private life’ (“uno specchio d’una vita privata”) that aims to educate

²⁹ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, prologue. (“Comedies exist to benefit and to please the audience,” trans. Gilbert, 824.)

³⁰ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, prologue. (“But if comedies are to give pleasure, they must incite the audience to laughter,” trans. Gilbert, 824.)

³¹ There still exists some debate among scholars as to whether Machiavelli is the author of this unfinished treatise in light of its strident criticisms of Dante, and its dating to the mid-1510s is a matter of conjecture. For a useful overview of the lesser-known *Discorso ovvero Dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua*, I recommend Massimo Verdicchio, “Machiavelli on Dante on language,” *Forum Italicum* 47.3 (2013): 522-539.

³² Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 929. (“And of this sort are comedies because, although the aim of a comedy is to hold up a mirror to private life, nonetheless its method of doing so is with a certain urbanity, and with expressions that move one to laughter, so that men who rush toward that delight will also enjoy its useful example underneath.”)

especially through the use of laughter (“con termini che muovano a riso”), which makes a comedy’s moral lessons enjoyable through the pleasure of shared amusement. Laughter is thus key to a Machiavellian theory of comedy, and further reveals its curative power in *Clizia*, where instruction, pleasure, and emotional release come together to provide a cathartic remedy—or in other words, a comic catharsis—for author and audience alike.

The notion of comic catharsis possesses Aristotelian roots, though Aristotle’s theory of comedy remains lost.³³ In part a reformulation of the original theory of catharsis found in the *Poetics*, the concept of comic catharsis, largely advanced by the critical work of Kenneth Bennett and Dana Sutton,³⁴ offers a new hermeneutic approach to the study of the genre. According to Bennett, the idea can be traced most clearly to the Roman rhetorician Quintilian, who considered comedy to be a “restorative to the mind in a state of disgust and fatigue.”³⁵ Quintilian also asserted that laughter played a central role in the purgation of negative emotions, such as hatred and anger, but importantly, noted its close relationship to its more sinister counterpart, derision:

Moreover, there is a great variety in the things which raise a laugh, since we laugh not merely at those words or actions which are smart or witty, but also at those which reveal folly, anger, or fear. Consequently, the cause of laughter is uncertain, since laughter is never far removed from derision. For as Cicero said, ‘Laughter has its basis in some kind or other of deformity or ugliness,’ and whereas, when we point to such a blemish in others, the result is

³³ On the subject of classical theories of comedy and the Roman approach to laughter, see Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2014), in particular 23-48.

³⁴ See Kenneth Bennett, “The Affective Aspects of Comedy,” *Genre* 14.2 (1981): 191-205, in which the author offers a model of intersecting planes of emotion; and Dana Sutton, *The Catharsis of Comedy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), who develops a theory of comedy by examining the function of laughter and its effects, particularly those of a psychological nature.

³⁵ Kenneth Bennett, “The Affective Aspects of Comedy”: 194. Mary Beard further notes that Cicero was a major source for Quintilian, who wrote *De Oratore* nearly 150 years earlier (Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 123-127).

known as wit, it is called folly when the same jest is turned against ourselves.³⁶

Quintilian therefore draws attention to the powerfully ambiguous nature of laughter, which can be manipulated in the course of amusement and ridicule alike. This duality can be further exploited on the theatrical stage: though the spectators' laughter occurs as a result of enjoyment, its source is often an object of ridicule. Cinquecento comedy became the perfect vehicle for this tension between entertainment and critique: these plays dealt in domestic spaces and private lives, turning an exacting eye to the stupidity, vice, and anxieties of Renaissance culture as a way to probe, question, and even mock the dominant views of that society.

The connection between laughter and ridicule propels the 'remedy' at the heart of *Clizia*, which comes to a head in the comedy's central tensions between husband and wife. Through Sofronia's machinations, *Clizia* explores and engages the power of ridicule and shame to act as an agent of change, influencing and even shaping men's behaviors. At the end of the play, the process of comic catharsis culminates in the explosive and visceral laughter of the servants in the face of their master's folly, signaling to the audience to join in celebration of the antagonist's disgrace. Yet how Sofronia comes to organize such a spectacle in *Clizia*, and why this remedy proves so successful when other strategies fail her, becomes key to understanding Machiavelli's relationship to the visual power of the spectacular—sometimes violent, always cathartic—and as such, proves crucial to the establishment of a Machiavellian teleology of spectacle, as we shall see.

³⁶ Quintilian, Chapter 3, Book VI, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920-1922). First accessed online through the University of Chicago, 7 February 2019: <https://tinyurl.com/mvjdh39f>.

Spectacle and the Spectacular

As Machiavelli illustrated in his political works, public spectacle had the power to shape both behavior and perspective. In *Il Principe*, chapter 7, he recounts the story of Rimirro de Orco, Cesare Borgia's plenipotentiary minister who had been entrusted with governing the Romagna in Borgia's absence. In order to establish control over the recently conquered populace, Borgia instructed Orco, "uomo crudele ed espedito," to institute authoritarian regime in order to restore stability and render the province "pacifica e ubbidiente"; Orco succeeded in this aim, garnering "grandissima reputazione" for his cruelty.³⁷ Borgia, as Machiavelli explains, soon realized the danger of excessive cruelty and, fearing popular uprisings, decided to make an example out of his minister: he had Orco's mutilated body placed on display in the public square of Cesena, as an act of "retribution" for his violence against the people there:

... perché dubitava non divenissi odiosa, e preposevi uno iudizio civile nel mezzo della provincia, con uno presidente eccellentissimo, dove ogni città vi aveva lo avvocato suo. E perché conosceva le rigorosità passate avergli generato qualche odio, per purgare li animi di quelli populi e guadagnarseli in tutto, volse mostarare che, se crudeltà alcuna era seguita, non era causata da lui ma da la acerba natura del ministro. E presa sopra a questa occasione, lo fece, a Cesena, una mattina mettere in dua pezzi in su la piazza, con uno pezzo di legne e uno coltello sanguinoso accanto: la ferocità del quale spettacolo fece quegli popoli in uno tempo rimanere soddisfatti e stupidi.³⁸

³⁷ Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 70. ("Hence he put in charge there Messer Remirro de Orco, a man cruel and ready, to whom he gave the most complete authority. This man in a short time rendered the province peaceful and united, gaining enormous prestige," trans. Gilbert, 31.)

³⁸ Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 70. ("... because he feared it would become a cause for hatred; so he set up a civil court in the midst of the province, with a distinguished presiding judge, where every city had its lawyer. And because he knew that past severities had made some men hate him, he determined to purge such men's minds and win them over entirely by showing that any cruelty which had gone on did not originate with himself but with the harsh nature of his agent. So getting an opportunity for it, one morning at Cesena he had Messer Remirro laid in two pieces in the public square with a block of wood and a bloody sword near him. The ferocity of this spectacle left those people at the same time gratified and awe-struck," trans. Gilbert, 31.)

In this passage, Machiavelli underscores Borgia's discernment of the risks associated with appearing too cruel, necessitating an additional act of violence to shape the people's perception of him. He, according to the author, must "purgare li animi" (purge their souls) in order to *mostrare* (meaning to show, but also to teach)³⁹ that the cruelty they had previously endured originated with the minister, rather than with Borgia. Seeking to convince the people of another reality, this spectacle of violence is therefore an act of dissimulation that aimed to purge their hatred (*odio*) by giving them an outlet for their emotions. Here Machiavelli describes a political act—Borgia's assassination of Orco—using the very language of catharsis that takes place on stage, as Aristotle explains in his *Poetics*: the spectator who witnesses tragedy experiences a process of purgation, an emotional release which leads to renewal. In the case of Borgia, that feeling of hatred needed to be cleansed from the people so that a new order may be established, and thus he orchestrated a spectacle (*spettaculo*) which would renew their faith in his rule—the ferocity (*ferocità*) of which led the people to become both "satisfatti" with the punishment meted out, and "stupidi" from its violence. Significantly, the word *stupido* comes from the Latin *stupidus* (meaning struck senseless, confounded, or amazed), and in fact, the term itself has a strong connection to the act of purging and to the process of catharsis: *il sommo poeta* Dante Alighieri uses it twice in his *Purgatorio*,⁴⁰ in which *li animi* detained in Purgatory must, as the name suggests, purge their earthly sins through penitence in order to be purified and renewed before entering Paradiso.

³⁹ L'Accademia della Crusca offers the following definition of the verb *mostrare*: "Porre l'oggetto innanzi alla vista, manifestare, palesare," Accademia della Crusca. Online.

http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=MOSTRARE_ed1 The term stems from the Latin *monstrare*, meaning "to show, point out, indicate, inform, advise, teach, instruct." Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). Online.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=monstro>

⁴⁰ Dante's use of the adjective *stupido* occurs in *Purgatorio* IV, vv. 58-59 ("Ben s'avvide il poeta ch'io stava / stupido tutto al carro de la luce") and in XVI, vv. 67-69 ("Non altrimenti stupido si turba / lo montanaro, e rimirando ammuta, / quando rozzo e salvatico s'inurba"); Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), 119, 775.

According to Machiavelli, then, Borgia seems to have understood that by staging a ‘ferocious’ spectacle in the most public of spaces in the Italian cityscape—the piazza—the people of the Romagna would become witness to an extreme violence through which they might purge their fear, one of the prevailing emotions that dictates human behavior. In executing Orco, Borgia provided them the experience of catharsis which relieved them emotionally of the suffering endured at Orco’s hand, and simultaneously used this same act as a guarantee that such violence would not occur again, at least not without punishment. It is noteworthy, then, that the word for this scene—*spettaculo*—is the same term used for a theatrical stage production. The historical dictionary of the Accademia della Crusca defines the word *spettacolo* as “propriamente giuoco, o festa, rappresentata pubblicamente, come giostre, cacce, e simili,”⁴¹ from the Latin *spectaculum*, meaning a show, sight or spectacle (from *specto*, “I watch, observe, look at, see”),⁴² suggesting origins in carnival. Spectacle therefore necessitates a witnessing and often denotes a sense of enjoyment or gratification. Machiavelli’s illustration of this concept in a distinctly political context underscores the author’s innovative thinking, and indeed paves the way for the composition of his later theatrical works, where he would unite his philosophy on the power of spectacle with the act of creating it.

Moreover, in Book 3 of his *Discourses*,⁴³ Machiavelli provides an additional example of the political currency afforded by spectacle in recounting a tale of war that includes a particularly striking visual element. Warning against the dangers that may arise after one succeeds in

⁴¹ Accademia della Crusca Online. http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=SPETTACOLO_ed1

⁴² Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). Online. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=spectaculum>

⁴³ A work of political history and philosophy inspired by Livy’s *History of Rome*, Machiavelli worked on the *Discourses* over a long period of his life, beginning on or near the year in which he composed his more well-known *Principe*, circa 1513; the three-volume project was only published posthumously in 1531, four years after the author’s death. Citations of the *Discorsi* are taken from Rinaldo Rinaldi’s edition: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*, vols. 1-2, ed. Rinaldo Rinaldi (Turin: UTET, 1999).

conspiracy to assassinate a ruler, he tells the story of Caterina Sforza,⁴⁴ who, upon the assassination of her husband in 1488, persuaded her captors to let her re-enter her fortress by offering her children as collateral, on the agreement that she would immediately surrender it:

Costoro sotto questa fede ve la lasciarono entrare; la quale, come fu dentro, dalle mura rimproverò loro la morte del marito e minacciògli d'ogni qualità di vendetta; e per mostrare che de' suoi figliuoli non si curava, mostrò loro le membra genitali dicendo che aveva ancora il modo a rifarne. Così costoro, scarsi di consiglio e tardi advedutosi del loro errore, con uno perpetuo exilio patirono pena della poca prudenza loro.⁴⁵

In Machiavelli's telling, the spectacle of Caterina Sforza's genitals embodies, first and foremost, a display of distinctly female power. Indeed, Machiavelli makes clear that the grave error committed by these conspirators was precisely their assumption that Caterina's femaleness, or more specifically, her motherhood, would guarantee their collateral gamble. Upon entering, Caterina not only denies them this assumption, she also creates a powerful performance out of her body by placing it in the most prime visual position—atop her castle wall—and displaying to her children's captors the regenerative power of her female body, symbolized by her naked genitals. In this passage, Machiavelli's double use of the verb *mostrare* echoes the aforementioned passage on Borgia from *Il Principe* and further underscores the visual power and indeed theatricality of

⁴⁴ Caterina Sforza Riario (1463-1509) was the illegitimate daughter of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, duke of Milan (1444-1476), and wife of Girolamo Riario, whom she wed in 1477. When the Count Riario was assassinated in a conspiracy, Caterina and her children were taken prisoner, during which the infamous scene detailed above occurs. Her uncle Ludovico (Il Moro) Maria Sforza (1452-1508) soon came to her aid, after which Caterina ruled until she was ousted from Forlì by Cesare Borgia in 1500. Machiavelli was sent to visit her as a diplomatic envoy on behalf of the Florentine *Signoria* just one year prior, in 1499. On Caterina Sforza's life and times, see Natale Graziani and Gabriella Venturelli, *Caterina Sforza* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001).

⁴⁵ Machiavelli, 3.6, *Discorsi*, 1005. ("With that promise, they let her enter. As soon as she was inside, she reproached them from the wall with the death of her husband, threatening them with every kind of revenge. And to show that she did not care about her children, she uncovered to them her genital members, saying that she still had means for producing more children. So, unprovided with a plan and realizing too late their mistake, with lifelong exile they paid the penalty for their imprudence," trans. Gilbert, 443-4.)

Sforza's exposition as it related to her specific objective: a literal 'show' intended to demonstrate her distinctly feminine power. Similar to Cesare Borgia's shocking and public display of Rimirro d'Orca's mutilated body, the effect of Caterina's provocation left the men confounded ("scarsi di consiglio")—and importantly here, without a counterattack. Having eliminated this insurrection, she remained in power until 1500 when ironically, she would cede her fortress to Borgia himself.

What makes this example even more interesting is that Machiavelli himself appears to have invented the now-infamous detail of Caterina's skirt-lifting. As Julia Hairston has noted, the event was both well-known and well-documented in this period, although contemporary accounts were varied. While the skirt-lifting has become part of Caterina's legend, Hairston's meticulous research shows that Machiavelli's account in the *Discorsi* was the original source of this salacious detail.⁴⁶ Thus, the ways in which Machiavelli (and others following the version of events described in the *Discorsi*) made use of this detail are quite revealing and prompt the question: why invent such a detail? The answer, I would argue, lies in the gesture's spectacular quality, which becomes, in this narrative, explicitly linked to her femaleness. While Caterina's gesture revealed her most vulnerable self, it was also a visual cue imbued with power and agency.

It is noteworthy, then, that Machiavelli would some years later return to the subject of spectacle's visual potency in *Clizia*, and its implications for the social, cultural, political, and economic spheres of his world. Spectacle, in fact, represents a nexus of these three domains, as evidenced in the cultural importance placed on public festivals, celebrations, and spectacles of all sorts throughout the Renaissance period.⁴⁷ In *Il Principe*, Machiavelli advocates the important role

⁴⁶ Julia L. Hairston, "Skirting the Issue: Machiavelli's Caterina Sforza," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53.3 (2000): 687-712, in particular 689-694.

⁴⁷ On the history and utility of spectacle in Renaissance Italy, See Ronald Martinez, "Spectacle," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Michael Wyatt (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 239-259.

that spectacle could play in civic life, maintaining that the ideal ruler should also demonstrate his benevolence through the organization of popular festivals and performances in order to “tenere occupati e’ populi” and endear them to their prince.⁴⁸ Machiavelli would have seen the political value of spectacle firsthand in witnessing the lavish pageantry sponsored by the returning Medici family after their ouster some years earlier (a homecoming which eventually led to Machiavelli’s exile from public life). For the Medici, visual art, spectacle, and politics were all closely correlated, and they were known to use their patronages as an expression of their identity as a family, especially to their political advantage.⁴⁹ Drawing on the popularity of the Renaissance *festa* (festival), the Medici sought to bring people together and unite them in their favor. The annual period known as *Carnevale* (based on the liturgical calendar, leading up to the Lenten period) was an important time for such festivities, and provided a bridge between the more religious celebrations and the later urban spectacles (often held at court). Many theatrical performances were commonly staged as part of the carnival season, and some plays even drew upon *Carnevale* for their backdrop, as in the case of both *Mandragola* and *Clizia*.⁵⁰

In *Clizia*, then, Machiavelli expands on his earlier theories of spectacle’s usefulness to encompass the remedial, moving beyond the realm of the political and into that of the social by

⁴⁸ The reference comes from *Il Principe*, chapter 21, which focuses on what a ruler should do in order to be respected and praised; for example, “Debbe oltre a questo, ne’ tempi convenienti dello anno, tenere occupati e’ populi con feste e spettacoli.” Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 186. (“In addition to this, at proper times of the year he engages the people’s attention with festivals and shows,” trans. Gilbert, 84.)

⁴⁹ Dale Kent’s critical study of Medici family patronage is especially insightful in its investigation of the Medici’s myth-building project, which in turn aimed at consensus building in Florence in the period relative to Cosimo de’ Medici and his sons (c. 1420-1464). See Dale Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: the patron’s oeuvre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), particularly 41-67 (“Venues and Performances”).

⁵⁰ In *Clizia*, for example, Nicomaco explicitly announces, in response to Sofronia heading to mass: “Ed è per carnescale: pensa quel che tu farai di quaresima!” Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3. (“And in Carnival time! Imagine what you’ll be doing in Lent,” trans. Gilbert, 832.) Though *Mandragola* lacks a specific reference to the *carnevale* period, Ronald Martinez has established a timeframe for the comedy that sets it during the carnival period. See Martinez, “The Benefit of Absence,” 119, as well as Martinez, “The Pharmacy of Machiavelli: Roman Lucretia in *Mandragola*,” *Renaissance Drama* 14 (1983): 21-23.

underscoring spectacle's connection to social and cultural norms. By exploiting concepts of shame and honor, the comedy reveals a new manifestation of this visual power, demonstrating how an intentionally public display of private affairs can be manipulated to influence, even change, another's behavior. In the comedy, Sofronia's ultimate plan—in its essence, a manipulation of this exact power—emerges out of a discourse on remedy, echoing the very same language employed in Machiavelli's earlier *Mandragola* (the primarily in chapter 1). In the first act of the play, the word “rimedio” appears three separate times as part of the discussion of Cleandro's lovesickness and how to resolve it. Like his father, Nicomaco, Cleandro too is infatuated with the young Clizia and hopes to marry her, despite her unknown lineage. By the second act, however, the attention has shifted from Cleandro's love woes to Sofronia's predicament: both her son and husband are engaged in a rivalry for the girl, leaving Clizia's best interests to her adoptive mother.⁵¹ In II.6, we encounter an exasperated and desperate Sofronia, who laments her situation and the predicament in which her husband has placed their household by pursuing the young Clizia and cries out for a solution: “se Iddio non ci rimedia, che questa povera casa non rovini!”⁵² Importantly, her use here of the verb *rimediare* marks the first moment in the play that the connotations of the term shift.⁵³ In other words, the concept of remedy, or rather, its power to affect change both positive and negative, initially appears to lie primarily in the hands these two self-serving men, who seek only to possess Clizia for themselves. Sofronia's proclamation, on the other hand, functions as an

⁵¹ On Sofronia's motherhood in relation to both Cleandro, her natural-born son, and Clizia, her adopted daughter, I direct the reader to Yael Manes's insightful chapter, “Replacing the Father: Negotiating Motherhood and the Battle for Authority in Machiavelli's *Clizia*,” in *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities*, 43-64.

⁵² Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.4. The line comes from Sofronia's only monologue in the play, which directly follows an unresolved confrontation between her and Nicomaco in II.3. (“Hence I'm afraid, if God doesn't furnish us a cure, that this poor house will be ruined,” trans. Gilbert, 836.)

⁵³ This shift in the meaning of the word *rimedio* mirrors that which occurs in *Mandragola* as well, where initially the word denotes a cure of love suffering and/or infertility, later evolving to encompass the remedy to a problem.

appropriation of this power, almost like a rhetorical call to arms, not for herself but rather on behalf of Clizia, and ultimately for the *bene comune* of their entire household.

Several encounters in act II reveal that the situation has reached a critical juncture, leading Sofronia to the development of her eventual scheme, which arises precisely from her initial failure to convince Nicomaco of his foolish and destructive behavior. Across several scenes (II.3, III.1, and III.4), Nicomaco dismisses outright his wife's attempts exert influence over his behavior, largely because her effort remained a private one, conducted by his social inferior and within the confines of the domestic space where Nicomaco continues to enjoy the benefits of his patriarchal dominance. As a result, Sofronia learns firsthand the critical importance of negotiating the private and public spaces of their lives, which will give her the necessary leverage to provoke the feelings of shame, and perhaps even remorse, that she hopes will change his behavior. Sofronia, consumed by the threat of embarrassment brought on by her husband's behavior, threatens to go public with the scandal:

Io ti concludo questo, Nicomaco, che tu hai speso in nutrir costei, ed io ho durato fatica in allevarla; e per questo, avendoci io parte, io voglio ancora io intendere come queste cose hanno ad andare: o io dirò tanto male e commetterò tanti scandoli, che ti parrà essere in mal termine, che non so come tu ti alzi el viso.⁵⁴

Though Sofronia attempts here an initial appeal to their mutual responsibility for the girl's well-being ("tu hai speso... ed io ho durato fatica"), she ultimately resorts to the threat of freely disclosing his behavior, hoping that the risk inherent in her "tanti scandoli" would be enough to mitigate his actions. Yet Nicomaco responds dismissively by likening her threat of scandal to mere

⁵⁴ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3. ("It comes to this, Nicomaco: you've spent money in bringing her up, and I've put labor into caring for her, and so, since I've a share in these things, I intend also to see for myself how they'll turn out—or I'll say so many bad things and stir up so much scandal that you'll think you're in a bad way, for I don't know how you can show your face," trans. Gilbert, 834.)

idle gossip (“tu mi minacci di chiacchiere”⁵⁵); notably, his deployment of the word *chiacchiere* implies talk of little value or import, which serves to challenge and undermine her threat. In this rebuttal, he addresses her directly (“tu mi minacci”), but strategically switches to first person plural pronoun *noi* (‘we’) as a reminder to his wife of the impossibility of extracting herself from the family scandal, regardless of her inculpability. When despite his initial protestations Nicomaco admits they will become the talk of the town (“se noi entriamo in cetere, noi saremo la favola del popolo”⁵⁶) his repetition of the personal pronoun *noi*—which is most often omitted in Italian unless there exists a need for either clarity or emphasis—functions to stress the strong and coercing binds of family in Renaissance culture.

This scene illustrates what Guido Ruggiero calls the “disciplining forces” of Renaissance domestic life: honor, family, and marriage.⁵⁷ The implications are thus powerful: if Sofronia contradicts her husband or brings dishonor upon the family in any way, especially in a public forum, the resulting shame will impact her life as well. Sofronia’s threat to “dir male” also recalls Machiavelli’s words in the prologue to his earlier play, *Mandragola* (1518): “Pur, se credessi alcun, dicendo male, tenerlo pe’ capegli, e sbigottirlo o ritirarlo in parte, io l’ammonisco, e dico a

⁵⁵ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3. (“You can threaten me with chattering,” trans. Gilbert, 834.) The Accademia della Crusca also offers the following definition for the word “chiacchiera”: “Ciarla, Favola, Vanità, Cosa di poco pregio,” which underscores Nicomaco’s accusation of irrelevance. Online. www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=chiacchiera

⁵⁶ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3. (“If we keep up this nonsense, we’ll be the laughingstock of the town,” trans. Gilbert, 834.)

⁵⁷ Ruggiero offers a novella from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* as a powerful example of these “disciplining forces”: Lisabetta da Messina (Day IV, novella 5). Lisabetta’s affair with Lorenzo, a young man who worked for her merchant family in Messina, presented a problem for her brothers precisely because it threatened the family’s honor, and hers as well. Her behavior was understood as a reflection on the honor of the family as a whole, and also threatened to ruin her ‘value’ on the marriage market. The brothers chose to murder Lorenzo in an attempt to preserve this honor, and the tale ends when Lisabetta dies of a broken heart. See Guido Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 109-112; as well as Ruggiero, “Getting a Head in the Renaissance: Mementos of Lost Love in Boccaccio and Beyond,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 67. 4 (2014): 1165-1190.

questo tale, che *sa dir male anch'egli*, e come questa fu la suo prim'arte" (my emphasis).⁵⁸ In this prologue, the author acknowledges his own ability to incite scandal through language, what he refers to as his "first art." Having suffered a significant blow to his own reputation in the wake of his exile and banishment from public life just a few years earlier, in 1513, Machiavelli knew the power of words, and more specifically, of that "dir male," to cause scandal, to inflict irreparable damage, to change a man's life forever. Much like the poet Dante Alighieri before him, Machiavelli too recognized the possibilities afforded by literature to correct the record on one's own terms; to influence, if not the immediate outcome, the judgement of history.⁵⁹ On a more local level, Machiavelli's allusion to this power in the prologue of the *Mandragola*—"che sa dir male anch'egli"—aligns him more closely with his character, Sofronia. Like Machiavelli in exile, Sofronia recognizes her inferior social position in this exchange with her husband, and as a result of this lack of authority, must resort to threats in order to thwart his self-serving schemes.

In this very same moment, however, Nicomaco seems to have grasped the merits of her argument: he appears to cede by asking for a sort of truce so that they both might avoid such an outcome, again resorting to the first-person plural in emphasis of the intertwined nature of their fate ("Sarebbe ci modo a raccapazzare questa cosa, e che noi non ci facessimo tenere pazzi?"). Sofronia's subsequent retort reveals her own, perhaps more nuanced, understanding of their situation. In their conflict, they are not 'crazy,' but rather, pathetic: "Pazzi no, ma tristi sí."⁶⁰ The

⁵⁸ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, ed. Gian Mario Anselmi (Milan: Mursia, 1984), prologue. ("Yet if anyone supposes that by finding fault he can get the author by the hair and scare him or make him draw back a bit, I give any such man a warning and tell him that the author, too, knows how to find fault, and that it was his earliest art," trans. Gilbert, 778.)

⁵⁹ Of course, the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri is most well-known for his *Divina Commedia*, and in particular the *Inferno*, in which he places, among others, contemporary figures—including popes—in their respective places in Hell, many of whom cannot be found in the historical record beyond Dante's own recollection of them, thereby memorializing their place in history as he saw fit.

⁶⁰ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3. ("Isn't there any way for putting an end to this thing, and not making people think we're crazy?"; "Not crazy, but certainly low-down," trans. Gilbert, 834.)

adjective *triste* is quite evocative here. It is a common expression in Machiavelli's thought; in *Il Principe*, the author deploys it a total of nine times, most notable in the three separate occasions in which he chooses it to describe "li uomini" in his pronouncements on the discontentedness inherent to human nature.⁶¹ In *Clizia*, Sofronia applies the adjective to the couple themselves, recognizing their collective wretchedness: Nicomaco, for his desire to molest their young ward, and Sofronia, for her inability thus far to impede him. The confrontation between Nicomaco and Sofronia in II.3 draws attention to shame as a remedy to unresolved domestic affairs, as both husband and wife attempt to claim this recourse in order to temper the other.

Love, Lovesickness, and the Loss of Self

Following the tense scene between Sofronia and Nicomaco, Sofronia performs her only monologue of the comedy (II.4). This soliloquy offers the audience an opportunity to hear Sofronia's unmediated thoughts as she contemplates and voices her concerns on the drastic change in her husband's behavior over the course of the past year. Importantly, her speech becomes a crucial rebuttal to Cleandro's denunciation of his mother at the beginning of the comedy, in which he accuses her of acting against Nicomaco out of jealousy: "Ma Sofronia, mia madre, che prima un pezzo dello innamoramento si era avveduta, scoperse questo agguato, e con ogni industria, mossa da gelosia ed invidia, attende a guastare."⁶² Cleandro's depiction of Sofronia as jealous and resentful gives the audience their first indication of her character and reveals Cleandro's own

⁶¹ See, for instance, Chapter 17 ("perché l'amore è tenuto da uno vincolo di obbligo, il quale, per essere li uomini tristi, da ogni occasione di propria utilità è rotto"), Chapter 18 ("se li uomini fussino tutti buoni, questo precetto non sarebbe buono; ma perché sono tristi..."), and Chapter 23 ("perché li uomini sempre ti riusciranno tristi, se da una necessità non sono fatti buoni") in Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 140, 146, 192.

⁶² Machiavelli, *Clizia*, I.1. ("But Sofronia, my mother, who for some time had realized he was in love, discovered this trick and, driven by jealousy and anger, is working as hard as she can to spoil it," trans. Gilbert, 828.)

cynical perception of her motivations. In Cleandro's view, Sofronia is not looking out for the well-being of the household, but rather he assumes that she feels threatened by her husband's infatuation with the young girl. In her monologue, however, we meet Sofronia alone and gain access to her inner thoughts. When she is finally able to speak for herself, absent from her discourse is any concrete suggestion of jealousy or resentment. Instead, a key aspect of Sofronia's speech is her focus on Nicomaco's negative transformation and its impact on their family, from positive role model to negative *exemplum*:

Chi conobbe Nicomaco uno anno fa, e lo pratica ora, ne debbe restare maravigliato, considerando la gran mutazione, che gli ha fatta, perché solea essere uno uomo grave, risoluto, rispettivo. Dispensava il tempo suo onorevolmente, e si levava la mattina di buon'ora, udiva la sua messa, provvedeva al vitto del giorno; dipoi, s'egli aveva faccenda in piazza, in mercato, o a' magistrati, e' le faceva; quando che no, o e' si riduceva con qualche cittadino tra ragionamenti onorevoli, o e' si ritirava in casa nello scrittoio, dove raguagliava sue scritture, riordinava suoi conti; dipoi, piacevolmente con la sua brigata desinava; e, desinato, ragionava con il figliuolo, ammunivalo, lavagli a conoscere gli uomini, e con qualche essempro antico e moderno gl'insegnava vivere; andava dipoi fuori, consumava tutto il giorno o in faccende o in diporti gravi ed onesti; venuta la sera, sempre l'Avemaria lo trovava in casa: stavasi un poco con esso noi al fuoco, se gli era di verno; dipoi, se n'entrava nello scrittoio, a rivedere le faccende sue; alle tre ore si cenava allegramente. Questo ordine della sua vita era un essempro a tutti gli altri di casa, e ciascuno si vergognava non lo imitare. E così andavano le cose ordinate e liete. Ma, dipoi che gli entrò questa fantasia di costei, le faccende sue si straccurano, e poderi si guastano, e traffichi rovinano; grida sempre, e non sa di che; entra ed esce di casa ogni dl mille volte, senza sapere quello che si vada facendo; non torna mai ad ora, che si possa cenare o desinare a tempo; se tu gli parli, o e' non ti risponde, o e' ti risponde non a proposito. I servi, vedendo questo, si fanno beffe di lui, il figliuolo ha posto giù la reverenzia, ognuno fa a suo modo, e infine niuno dubita di fare quello che vede fare a lui: in modo che io dubito, se Iddio non ci remedia, che questa povera casa non rovini.⁶³

⁶³ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.4.

Here, Sofronia reveals her underlying motivations and offers the audience a glimpse at the fuller context of her relationship with Nicomaco. She first describes his “gran mutazione” by detailing how he *used to be* (“soleva essere uno uomo grave, risoluto, respettivo”) and what he *used to do*. Most notable here is her repetition of verbs used in the past imperfect tense, the mood used to indicate a past action’s habitual nature: “dispensava il tempo suo onorevolmente,” “si levava,” “udiva,” “provedeva,” “aveva,” “faceva,” “si riduceva,” “si ritirava,” “riordinava,” and so on. According to Sofronia, not only did his behavior befit a serious and upstanding citizen, it proved exemplary, “uno esemplo a tutti gli altri di casa.” Nicomaco’s actions served as a model to those in his household, and thus he fulfilled his duty as family patriarch successfully and with honor. Ferroni has also noted how in Sofronia’s monologue, civil and moral values coalesce, whereby the “old ways” of Nicomaco are delineated “come ritratto positivo del perfetto cittadino, come modello di una «virtù»” (as a positive portrayal of the perfect citizen, as a model of ‘virtù’) that seeks to conserve the traditional ethical standards of the bourgeoisie.⁶⁴

This sense of civic and patriarchal duty belongs to the wider cultural framework of the Italian Renaissance. It was the subject of numerous treatises, such as Gian Battista Alberti’s well-known *Quattro libri della famiglia* (1433-1440), in which the proper ordering of family life was considered an essential aspect of one’s manly honor, his *virtù*, and that which grounded his participation in civic life. As Guido Ruggiero has written, Alberti’s influential *Libri della famiglia* have long been seen as a “paean to patriarchal values and the patrilineal ideal,” in which the patriarchal family unit was extolled as “the very building block of the *civiltà* of the period.”⁶⁵ In

⁶⁴ Ferroni, “*Mutazione*” e “*riscontro*” nel teatro di Machiavelli, 111.

⁶⁵ Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 253. This view has been reevaluated in recent years, based in part on the semi-ambiguous nature of the dialogue genre in which the treatise was written, as John M. Najemy has argued. See in particular John M. Najemy, “Giannozzo and His Elders: Alberti’s Critique of Renaissance Patriarchy,” in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 51-78; John M. Najemy, “Alberti on Love: Musings on Private

the text, Alberti refers to the concept of honor more than one hundred times across its four volumes, a testament to its importance in the social-civic discourse of Renaissance Italy. A revealing passage arrives early on, in the prologue to the monumental work, attesting to the importance of honor in Alberti's humanist philosophy of the well-ordered family:

Ma se alcuno con diligenza qui vorrà investigare qual cosa molto estolla e accresca le famiglie, qual anche le mantenga in sublime grado d'onore e di felicità, costui apertamente vederà gli uomini le più volte aversi d'ogni suo bene cagione e d'ogni suo male, né certo ad alcuna cosa tanto attribuirà imperio, che mai giudichi ad acquistare laude, amplitudine e fama non più valere la virtù che la fortuna.⁶⁶

Here Alberti emphasizes the importance of a man's personal moral character, his honor, in earning "laude, amplitudine e fama," which elevated his family's status. In other words, the family patriarch bore responsibility for the successes, well-being, and reputation of his household, the cause of its triumphs as well as its failures ("d'ogni suo bene cagione e d'ogni suo male"). At the same time, honor was a complicated and fickle social value in Renaissance society, one that "hinged on publicly bestowed evaluation over which individuals only had limited control."⁶⁷ These social realities form the cultural context that underlie Sofronia's concerns for her family. Occupying the inferior social position, she must rely on her husband's honor to protect and elevate

Transgression and Public Discipline," in *Power, Gender, and Ritual in Europe and the Americas: Essays in Memory of Richard C. Trexler*, eds. Peter Arnade and Michael Rocke (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 135-152.

⁶⁶ The editions of the primary text consulted for this dissertation are Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, eds. Ruggiero Romano and Alberto Tenenti (Turin: Einaudi, 1969); and the English translation: Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence, Books One–Four*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1969). Alberti, *I Libri della famiglia*, 4. ("If anyone undertakes to investigate the nature of those things which exalt and increase the family, and to see how it is maintained at a high level of honor and happiness, he soon discovers that men are most inclined to view themselves as cause of their own good or poor estate. They will never attribute so much influence to anything as to deny, in the end, that praises, greatness, and fame are won more by character than by fortune," trans. Watkins, 26.)

⁶⁷ Sharon Strocchia, "Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London and New York: Longman, 1998), 39.

their family in the competitive urban marketplace: an “important yet intangible resource that figured in social transactions between people who might have competing property claims, divergent political or marital aspirations, patronage ties, class differences, or simply grudges against each other.”⁶⁸ Public esteem thus functioned as a significant marker of social standing, and a slight against one’s honor would necessarily trigger a decline in the patriarch’s ability to conduct his affairs, earn income, trade goods, and so on. While Sofronia’s monologue points to Nicomaco’s previous status as a “model citizen,” as Ferroni has observed, I would further argue that Sofronia’s monologue in fact reveals her own personal economic anxieties as a key part of her concern for the declining civic virtues of her husband. Her lament about the ruination of Nicomaco’s business affairs directly highlights this very concern: she claims that since Nicomaco has become infatuated with the young Clizia, his business affairs have all gone to ruin (“le faccende sue si straccurano, e poderi si guastono, e trafichi rovinano”). As the primary breadwinner for the family, Nicomaco’s improper passions directly impact the well-being of their household, threatening the moral order as well as the family’s financial stability. In other words, Sofronia’s motivations here indicate how the dominate socio-cultural and moral values of the merchant classes of Renaissance Florence were inextricably linked to the economic welfare of its families.

Sofronia concludes her monologue by recounting her husband’s recent “fantasia,” which has caused him to lose all good sense and decorum. Her understanding of his sudden transformation calls to mind E. R. Dodds’ examination of the concept of *ate* in ancient Greek epic: in Homer, for example, *ate* was understood as a state of mind, a momentary clouding of the normal consciousness which resulted in a partial or temporary insanity, ascribed to an external “daemonic” agency, perhaps as a punishment from the gods. In other words, an individual’s bad behavior was

⁶⁸ Strocchia, “Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities,” 40.

attributed to a temporary madness caused by a god's intervention and functioned as the lens through which others understood an individual's actions.⁶⁹ Similar to the Greek *ate*, Sofronia seems to come to terms with Nicomaco's misconduct by underscoring its external origins. She explains that the *fantasia* 'entered into him' ("dipoi che gli entrò questa fantasia"), after which his behavior began to change drastically. Not only have Nicomaco's affairs gone to ruin, but he has begun to act as if a temporary insanity has taken hold of him: constantly yelling and coming and going without knowing why he is doing any of it ("grida sempre, e non sa di che; entra ed esce di casa ogni dl mille volte, senza sapere quello che si vada faccendo"). Notably, Sofronia ends her speech with an appeal to God for a solution ("se Iddio non ci rimedio"), which further evokes the Greeks' understanding of the divine source of *ate*. Moreover, Sofronia's interpretation of Nicomaco's misbehavior as a "fantasia" paves the way for his ultimate redemption when it appears that he essentially 'comes to his senses' after being subjected to a sobering public ridicule. Furthermore, the understanding of Nicomaco's actions as a momentary lapse seems to exemplify one of the central tenets of Machiavelli's thought on the invariability of human nature; as an inherently good citizen, husband, and father, he has the potential to return as such by the play's end.

Nicomaco was not the only literary character of the Cinquecento to have succumbed to a kind of temporary insanity: this configuration recalls one of the primary plotlines in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, in which the Christian knight Orlando descends into madness after having been spurned in love by the pagan princess Angelica, who has fallen in love with another.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Dodds offers an illustrative example in citing a speech by Agamemnon, who sought to explain why he stole Achilles' mistress to replace the loss of his own: "But since I was blinded by *ate* and Zeus took away my understanding, I am willing to make my peace and give abundant compensation." E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 2-8.

⁷⁰ Machiavelli was quite familiar with Ariosto's epic poem, as illustrated in a well-known letter to his friend Lodovico Alamani in 1517. Machiavelli writes, "Io ho letto a questi dì *Orlando furioso* dello Ariosto, et

Though Orlando's insanity begins ten cantos earlier, it is not until Canto XXXIV that St. John the Baptist reveals to Astolfo, another of Charlemagne's paladins, that the true cause of Orlando's madness originates not with Angelica but comes from God himself: because of his improper passions for a pagan woman, God has punished him by clouding his senses, causing him to go mad. Orlando's madness is destructive, manifesting, in part, in a blind and rage-filled wandering—not unlike Sofronia's description of Nicomaco's own anger and nonsensical activities. Ultimately, Orlando is saved from his madness by Astolfo, who travels to the moon on the back of a hippogriff with St. John to retrieve the 'medicine' to restore Orlando's senses:

Sappi che 'l vostro Orlando, perché torse
dal camin dritto le commesse insegne,
è punito da Dio [...]

Sì accecato l'avea l'incesto amore /
d'una pagana [...]

E Dio per questo fa ch'egli va folle,
e mostra nudo il ventre, il petto e il fianco;
e l'intelletto sì gli offusca e tosse,
che non può altrui conoscere, e sé manco. [...]

veramente il poema è bello tutto, et in molto luoghi è mirabile. Se si truova costì, raccomandetemi a lui, et dategli che io mi dolgo solo che, havendo ricordato tanti poeti, che m'habbi lasciato indietro come un cazzo, et ch'egli ha fatto a me quello in sul suo *Orlando*, che io non farò a lui in sul mio *Asino*.” (“I recently read Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, and truly the whole poem is beautiful and in many places it is marvelous. If you happen to see him, give him my regards, and tell him that I am only sorry that, having memorialized so many poets, he left me out like a prick, and that what he did to me in his *Orlando*, I will not do to him in my *Asino*”—a reference to Machiavelli's *Asino d'oro*, an unfinished satirical poem.) Machiavelli's letter refers to the final canto of the *Orlando furioso* (XXXVI, 1-19), in which the poet details his metaphorical homecoming, when he is greeted by his readers, i.e., the men and women of letters who welcome and encourage him upon his return. As Machiavelli's letter indicates, his own name was not listed among these *literati* and as evidenced by his sarcastic remarks, it appears that the omission left him bitter and perhaps a touch disillusioned. Ascoli and Kahn offer a thorough treatment of his letter in their introduction to *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, and indeed, informs the premise of the entire volume. According to the authors, this correspondence provides evidence of Machiavelli's 'literariness,' or at the very least, his self-perception as a preeminent man of letters, worthy of inclusion among the other great writers of the era. See Niccolò Machiavelli, n. 170, in *Lettere*, ed. Franco Gaeta (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961), 382-384; as well as the discussion by Ascoli and Kahn in their introduction to *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, eds. Albert Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 1-15.

Gli è ver che ti bisogna altro viaggio
 far meco, e tutta abbandonar la terra.
 Nel cerchio de la luna a menar t'aggio,
 che dei pianeti a noi più prossima erra,
 perché la medicina che può saggio
 rendere Orlando, là dentro si serra.⁷¹

In this excerpt from the epic poem, we find a number of concepts and themes that appear in Sofronia's monologue. Much like Nicomaco, Orlando's inappropriate and unrequited love has driven him to madness. He was blinded ("accecato") by his lust for Angelica, who as a pagan is an especially unsuitable match for the noble Christian Orlando. This social deviance, named in the poem as "incesto amore," causes God to punish Orlando for diverging from the 'correct' order by pushing him into madness. Ariosto's verses further emphasize God's wrathful hand in Orlando's fate—"punito da Dio," and later, "E Dio per questo *fa ch'egli va folle*" (my emphasis)—which reflect the traditional Christian view of divine justice, but also call to mind the Greek concept of *ate*. It is also significant that Orlando's madness takes on the form of a Dantean *contrapasso*, a method of punishment and "divine revenge" that reflects, either through resemblance or contrast, the sin committed on earth.⁷² Just as Orlando's amorous passions deprived him of his sense of decorum and judgement, causing him to neglect his knightly duty to protect the emperor, in recompense God provoked in him a literal madness that obscured his reason—"e l'intelletto sì gli

⁷¹ All citations in the Italian are taken from Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso* (Milan: Garzanti, 2005). Here, cit. XXXIV, 62-67. ("Your Orlando has misappropriated the standards committed to him, and God is punishing him [...] So blinded has he been by his lustful passion for a pagan woman [...] Therefore God has sent him mad, to go about with bared chest and belly, and has so clouded his reason that he cannot recognize anyone, still less himself. [...] You shall, in fact, have to make a further journey with me and leave the earth altogether: I have to take you to the orb of the moon, this being the planet that travels closest to us, for the medicine to restore Orlando's sanity is kept there," trans. Guido Waldman (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1974, 1983), 418.)

⁷² Lino Pertile notes that although the *contrapasso* did not originate with Dante, "What distinguishes its appearance in the *Commedia* is that it functions not merely as a form of divine revenge, but rather as the fulfilment of a destiny freely chosen by each soul during his or her life." See Lino Pertile, "Dante," in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, eds. Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 63-64, cit. 64.

offusca e tolle.” Orlando’s blindness was thus turned inward: blind to his duty and his station, his madness caused him to become a stranger unto himself and others (“che non può altrui conoscere, e sé manco”). Moreover, this association between love and the loss of reason shares a further connection with Dante’s *Commedia*, in one of the most famous love stories of the Italian literary canon: the story of Paolo and Francesca, the cursed lovers of *Inferno* V. Much like Orlando, who in his despair roams and ravages across many lands, Paolo and Francesca are punished for their sins by a ceaseless infernal wind that tosses them about the second circle of Hell, where the lustful are condemned (“La bufera infernal, che mai non resta, / mena li spirti con la sua rapina; voltando e percotendo li molesta,” *Inf.* V, 31-33).⁷³ The *contrapasso* here works by analogy: the raging wind batters the souls of the lustful, controlling their movements in the afterlife just like their unrestrained passions controlled them while they were alive. Importantly, as the poet explains, Paola and Francesco are not damned to an eternity in the second circle because of any illicit sexual congress, but rather because their actions were the result of incontinence stemming from a lack of reason—“Intesi ch’a così fatto tormento / enno dannati i peccator carnali, *che la ragion sommettono al talento*,” *Inf.* V, 37-39 (my emphasis).⁷⁴ In Francesca’s telling, she too expresses this loss of self: “Amore... / mi prese del costui piacer sì forte, / che, come vedi, ancor non m’abbandona. / Amore condusse noi ad una morte,” *Inf.* V, 103-106.⁷⁵ Here, Francesca is acted

⁷³ Dante, *Inferno*, ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milan: Mondadori, 2005). (“The hellish hurricane, which never rests, / drives on the spirits with its violence: wheeling and pounding, it harasses them,” trans. Mandelbaum via Digital Dante).

⁷⁴ Dante, *Inferno* V. (“I learned that those who undergo this torment / are damned because they sinned within the flesh, / subjecting reason to the rule of lust,” trans. Mandelbaum via Digital Dante.)

⁷⁵ Dante, *Inferno* V. (“Love... / took hold of me so strongly through his beauty / that, as you see, it has not left me yet. / Love led the two of us unto one death,” trans. Mandelbaum via Digital Dante.) Teodolinda Barolini, “Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, and Gender,” *Speculum* 75.1 (2000): 9.

upon by Love, who ‘conducted’ the pair toward ‘one death’ through the lust which overtook their reason and now binds the lovers together in the afterlife.⁷⁶

Teodolina Barolini has suggested that Francesca’s syntax in these verses expresses her passivity and signifies her self-objectification. For Barolini, however, this passivity may be an indication of her agency—an assertion of “her agency and her personhood against a dynastic patriarchy that assigned no value to her pleasure.”⁷⁷ What to make, then, of Paolo’s passivity in death? Importantly, the poet never explicitly names him in the poem, and unlike Francesca, Paolo does not speak a word. He remains nameless and voiceless, indeed, a self-less figure who must rely on Francesca to recount their story for the poet and for posterity. In this way, Paolo’s loss of self is rendered indelible in the *Commedia*—while Francesca reclaims her agency through her romantic passivity, Paolo’s unbridled passions have marked him as weak and pathetic—a negative example of the patriarchal masculine ideal. Though condemned to Hell alongside his lover, Paolo does not recuperate his voice in the afterlife and must relinquish his authority to Francesca for eternity.

Unlike Paolo’s circumstances in the *Inferno*, however, Ariosto’s verses in Canto XXXIV indicate the possibility of redemption, which means that Orlando’s state of madness is not everlasting. Unlike the souls in Dante’s *Inferno*, Orlando has the opportunity to be saved from this divine punishment, through the “medicina” that will restore his sanity. Importantly, however, Orlando is forced to rely on others to retrieve the necessary cure to his ferocity. His blinding madness has rendered him impotent, incapable of saving himself, and so his fellow knight must rescue him instead. When Astolfo arrives on the moon as St. John instructs him, we learn that the

⁷⁶ An insightful study of Dante’s position on lust in the *Commedia* can be found in Nicolò Crisafi and Elena Lombardi, “Lust and the Law: Reading and Witnessing in *Inferno* V,” in *Ethics, Politics and Justice in Dante* (UCL Press, 2019). Online. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv8xnh0t.11>.

⁷⁷ Barolini, “Dante and Francesca da Rimini”: 10.

‘medicine’ is, in fact, Orlando’s ‘wits’ (*senno*). His wits are being kept in a jar and stored among many other vials of containing the wits of others who have similarly lost their sanity—though, as an indication of how profound Orlando’s madness was, Ariosto emphasizes that Orlando’s bottle was the largest of all—“quella è maggior di tutte, in che del folle / signor d’Anglante era il gran senno infuso.”⁷⁸ Astolfo collects Orlando’s wits, which can be restored to whom they belong by inhaling them, much like smelling salts that help to restore one to consciousness. When Astolfo eventually reunites with the savage Orlando, Ariosto likens Orlando to a beast: “avea di fera, più che d’uomo, il volto.”⁷⁹ The comparison suggests that Orlando’s madness has taken away his humanity as well as his reason. Thus, as part of the healing process, Astolfo must first endeavor to restore Orlando’s humanity by literally washing away the signs of his bestial existence before moving to return his wits to their rightful place:

Lo fa lavar Astolfo sette volte;
e sette volte sotto acqua l’attuffa;
sì che dal viso e da le membra stolte
leva la brutta ruggine e la muffa:
poi con certe erbe, a questo effetto colte,
la bocca chiuder fa, che soffia e buffa;
che non volea ch’avesse altro meato
onde spirar, che per lo naso, il fiato.

Aveasi Astolfo apparecchiato il vaso
in che il seeno d’Orlando era rinchiuso;
e quello in modo appropinquogli al naso,
che nel tirar che fece il fiato in suso,
tutto il votò: maraviglioso caso!
che ritornò la mente al primer uso;
e ne’ suoi bei discorsi l’intelletto
rivenne, più che mai lucido e netto.

[...] Poi che fu all’esser primo ritornato
Orlando più che mai saggio e virile,

⁷⁸ Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, XXXIV, 83. (“The one containing the mighty brain of mad Orlando was the biggest of them all,” trans. Waldman, 420.)

⁷⁹ Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, XXXIX, 45. (“His face resembled a beast’s more than a man’s,” trans. Waldman, 470.)

d'amor si trovò insieme liberato;
 sì che colei, che sì bella e gentile
 gli parve dianzi, e ch'avea tanto amato,
 non stima più se non per cosa vile.
 Ogni suo studio, ogni disio rivolse
 a racquistar quanto già amor gli tolse.⁸⁰

Here Astolfo enacts a ritual of cleansing and purging: a physical catharsis that prepares Orlando to return to reason. By washing away the dirt and grime—"la brutta ruggine e la muffa"—Orlando emerges from a primitive, almost sylvan state to reclaim his place among men. Newly freed ("liberato") from the love that imprisoned his mind, Orlando has been restored to a masculine ideal—"Orlando più che mai saggio e virile"—befitting of a knight of Charlemagne. This verse further emphasizes the link between Orlando's wisdom and his virility, establishing a poetics of chivalry in which knowledge, power, masculinity, and duty converge, set within the allusive layers of the poem's dynastic politics. Restored to his senses, Orlando can now fulfill his destiny and obligation as a knight, as his rehabilitation allows him to return to the battlefield and eventually kill King Agramante, thereby ending the war Agramante brought to France against Charlemagne. In the narrative of Orlando's fall and subsequent redemption, moral and civic virtues coalesce, and in turn reveal the underlying political concerns of early sixteenth-century Italy.

To return to a concern that lies at the heart of *Clizia*, Ariosto's poem also offers one indication of how sixteenth-century literature treated the theme of inappropriate love. Like Nicomaco's lust for Clizia, Orlando's mad pursuit of Angelica was improper, portrayed by the author as a form of insanity:

che non è in somma amor, se non insania [...]
 e se ben come Orlando ognun non smania,
 suo furor mostra a qualch'altro segnale.
 E qual è di pazzia segno più espresso

⁸⁰ Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, XXXIX, 56-57, 61.

che per altri voler, perder se stesso?⁸¹

It is worth emphasizing that the noun *insania* (insanity, madness) shares a root with *sano*, meaning healthy or sound. To be “insane” with love was a thus concept grounded in understandings of the body, manifested in the idea of ‘lovesickness’ that causes, in Ariosto’s language, a distinct loss of self—*perder se stesso*. Sofronia describes Nicomaco’s “gran mutazione” in similar terms: once “uno uomo grave, risoluto, rispettivo” (‘a grave, resolute, and respected man’), Nicomaco has lost himself, wandering around the city and his home without purpose. For young lovers more suited to such amorous passions—like *Mandragola*’s Callimaco—lovesickness might produce similarly unpleasant symptoms. Callimaco, madly in love with the beautiful Lucrezia, describes his lovesickness in bodily terms: “Se io potessi dormire la notte, se io potessi mangiare, se io potessi conversare, se io potessi pigliare piacere di cosa veruna, io sarei piú paziente ad aspettare el tempo; ma qui non c’è rimedio.”⁸² The reference here to ‘remedy’ (*rimedio*) echoes Astolfo’s search for the ‘medicina’ that would cure Orlando’s sickness, importantly, the cure for those young lovers for whom such passions were appropriate was vastly different than what we encounter in the *Orlando furioso* or in *Clizia*. For a robust young man like Callimaco, who was a far better match for Lucrezia than her foolish and impotent husband, Nicia, the remedy for such crippling lovesickness was the consummation of his desire. Only then will he be cured of his sleepless nights and loss of appetite. For young lovers, sexual intercourse outside of marriage is tacitly sanctioned because of the naturalness of such desire. This echoes Machiavelli’s own juxtaposition of the

⁸¹ Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, XXXIV, 1. (“Love [...] is nothing but madness. Though not everyone goes raving mad like Orlando, Love’s folly shows itself in other ways; what clearer sign of lunacy than to lose your own self through pining for another?” trans. Waldman, 282.)

⁸² Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, I.3. (“If I could sleep at night, if I could eat, if I could talk, if I could get pleasure out of anything, I’d wait for the right time with more patience. But now there’s nothing more I can do,” trans. Gilbert, 784). A more literal translation of this final clause would be “But there is no remedy here,” which to my mind speaks to this mind-body connection more directly.

“giovani ardenti” and the “vecchi amorosi” from *Clizia*’s third *canzone*: the old lovers, unsuited to the task, are better off leaving the passions of love to the youth. Nicomaco, however, does not seem easily convinced. In the face of Sofronia’s frustrated rebukes, he only commits further to his course of action—to devise a scheme that will marry the young girl to a stand-in, who will allow Nicomaco to access the martial bed at will. Sofronia must find other recourse and turns to the power of ridicule and shame to provide the ‘medicine’ for Nicomaco’s redemption.

Ridicule and the Spectacle of Shame

The cultural context of *Clizia* is closely linked to the broader concepts of honor, reputation, and status that delineated the socio-political spheres of Renaissance society. For the aristocratic and merchant classes, a man’s honor was intrinsically linked to his social status, which in turn influenced his financial affairs, the marriage prospects of his family members, and so on.⁸³ Sofronia’s soliloquy in II.4 illustrates her recognition the negative impact her husband’s behavior has had on the other members of the house: while the ‘former’ Nicomaco was a model citizen in his community and a credit to his household, his newfound rashness now provides a negative example, so that (especially at home) “niuno dubita di fare quello che vede fare lui.”⁸⁴ The servants make jokes of their master, the son has lost respect for his father—in short, the domestic order has dissolved and only a ‘remedy from God’ might save the family from ruin. Nicomaco’s conduct

⁸³ Guido Ruggiero offers an illuminating and useful study of the role of honor and social status in Renaissance Italy in his analysis of the famous tale of Lisabetta di Messina from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (Day IV, novella 5) to reveal the ways in which an individual’s identity was inherently measured by group perception, and thus constantly vulnerable the judgement of that group, or who Ruggiero defines as one’s “consensus reality.” This novella is also the subject of his 2014 essay “Getting a Head in the Renaissance: Mementos of Lost Love in Boccaccio and Beyond”: 1165-1190.

⁸⁴ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.4. (“Nobody is afraid to do what he himself is seen doing,” trans. Gilbert, 836.)

has upended standards of decorum, both publicly and privately, disrupting the social hierarchy and threatening his place in it.

Innumerable works from this period illustrate the prime importance afforded to the concept of honor in Renaissance society. Some of the most well-known texts, such as Alberti's aforementioned *Libri della Famiglia* and perhaps most especially Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano*, were constructed as books of advice aimed at guiding, even proscribing, the behavior of men and women, with particular focus on members of noble classes, as in the case of Castiglione's dialogue. These works grew in popularity over the course of the century, revealing the underlying anxieties of Italian society as it related to individual behavior and its connection to one's honor and reputation. Castiglione's *Cortegiano* was one of the most popular works of the sixteenth century, as its many reprints attest, and provides critical insights into life at a Renaissance court—especially the values, customs, and manners of the courtier class. Giovanni Della Casa's *Galateo over de' costumi* (published posthumously in 1558) represents another well-known example of such a text from the latter half of the Cinquecento. By the close of the sixteenth century, there existed thirty-eight editions of this text, illustrating its popularity and importance, and it remained a 'best-seller' in Italy until the nineteenth century and beyond.⁸⁵ In this text, the association between individual behavior and the impact on the honor of one's family is explicitly drawn, as evidenced by the implication that, following the advice therein, one might “tenere la diritta via con la salute dell'anima tua e con laude et onore della tua orrevole e nobile famiglia.”⁸⁶

⁸⁵ On the significance of Giovanni Della Casa's treatise in the sixteenth century, see Antonio Santosuosso, “Giovanni Della Casa and the Galateo: On Life and Success in the Late Italian Renaissance,” *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 11. 1 (1975): 1-13, in particular 1-2.

⁸⁶ Giovanni Della Casa, *Galateo overo de' costume*, ed. Stefano Prandi (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), 5. (“... so that, if you follow my advice, you may stay on the right path towards the salvation of your soul as well as for the praise and honour of your distinguished and noble family,” trans. Konrad Eisenbichler and Kenneth R. Bartlett (Toronto: Center for Renaissance Studies, 1986), 3.)

Consequently, a greater emphasis on behavior and reputation translated into an increased attention to appearances, which was surveilled, regulated, and reinforced by one's "consensus reality," a useful term I borrow from Guido Ruggiero.⁸⁷ In short, a consensus reality is a kind of 'imagined' reality that heavily influenced, even dictated, the lived experience of the individual in Italian Renaissance society. These realities were in essence "shared understandings" within an individual's larger community and included family, neighbors, social peers, fellow workers, and so on, and they were both flexible and loosely defined, changing from group to group. Importantly, as Ruggiero explains, the consensus reality "evokes a complex and ongoing process of self-negotiation and self-measuring against a series of personal publics that surrounded an individual in the small, intimate, urban world of the Rinascimento."⁸⁸ While the *piazza*, rather than the *corte*, formed the more typical backdrop of Cinquecento comedy, urban settings—like that of Nicomaco and Sofronia's Florence—would have contained a multitude of consensus realities that shaped everyday experiences. In *Clizia*, Sofronia realizes that Nicomaco's misconduct in the domestic space has repercussions that reverberate in the public sphere, consequences that will eventually come full circle to threaten the family's status as well.

Within the socio-cultural paradigm of honor, the concept of shame was an integral part of the philosophical discourse of sixteenth-century Italy, developed from the Judeo-Christian and Greek moral traditions. Greek physician-philosopher Galen (130-200 CE), for example, considered shame to be a critical component of a moral citizenry, which would prevent men from acting out their basest impulses and thereby control their behavior in both the public and private domains. Importantly, however, Galen understood that shame depends on the collective witnessing

⁸⁷ Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love*, 8; as well as Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 112-113.

⁸⁸ Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 112.

and subsequent judgment by one's community: "All men who have entered public life try to be moderate in all their actions... When those men have done some wrong and are caught, they are not ashamed of themselves, but that others have found them out."⁸⁹ Here Galen essentially affirms what Sofronia herself has come to understand: that her initial interventions failed precisely because Nicomaco has not yet 'been found out' by the wider community of his peers. His misbehavior has largely remained a family affair and his sense of honor remains in tact.

As a result, Nicomaco demonstrates a lack of care about the potential impact of his actions on his household, and when faced with Sofronia's repeated chastisements, he only grows more brazen. In a later scene (III.4), Sofronia again confronts her husband about his misconduct and asks if he is ashamed of his ongoing bad behavior:

SOFRONIA: Non ti vergogni tu di quello che tu fai da un anno in qua? Usi sempre con dei giovanetti, vai alla taverna, riparti in casa femmine, e dove si giuoca, spendi senza modo. Begli esempi, che tu dàì al tuo figliuolo! Date moglie a questi valenti uomini!

NICOMACO: Ah! moglie mia, non mi dir tanti mali ad un tratto! Serba qualche cosa a domani! Ma non è egli ragionevole che tu faccia più tosto a mio modo, che io a tuo?⁹⁰

Nicomaco's response illustrates the central issue between the couple: while Nicomaco risks the family's honor for his own personal pleasure, Sofronia's words are incapable of affecting his attitude or behavior. She chastises Nicomaco for his misconduct and reminds him of his duty to

⁸⁹ Galen, *On the Passion and Errors of the Soul*, trans. Paul Harkins (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1963), 45. Also cited in Werner Gundersheimer, "Renaissance Concepts of Shame and Pocaterra's *Dialoghi della vergogna*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47.1 (1994): 38.

⁹⁰ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, III.4. ("Now aren't you ashamed of what you've been doing for a year back? You're all the time with half a dozen young fellows, you go to the tavern, you're often in the whorehouse and the gambling joint, you spend money recklessly. A fine example you set for your son. Give a wife to these mighty men!"; "Oh, wife, don't say all the bad things to me at once; save something for tomorrow. But isn't it right that you should act as I wish, rather than I as you wish?", trans. Gilbert, 842.)

his family by alluding to the bad example he sets for his son, Cleandro. Sofronia hopes her words alone will shame him. Yet the ‘new’ Nicomaco personifies a kind of shamelessness, especially when the only person to try to force him to account is his wife, a social inferior. Nicomaco’s use of the expression “moglie mia” is thus both tinged with sarcasm and a reminder to Sofronia of her place in the dynamics of their household. Nicomaco’s deployment of it in this moment of conflict serves to emphasize the power disparity between the couple: in the patriarchal culture of Renaissance Italy, it is the husband decides how things are done, not his wife.

Conversely, Sofronia’s lines here attempt to remind Nicomaco of his place as head of household, especially as a role model for Cleandro, who will succeed his father one day as the family patriarch. As part of the responsibilities incumbent upon the family patriarch, Nicomaco would also be expected to defend the honor of the women under his tutelage, especially those he anticipated marrying off in profitable allegiances.⁹¹ *Clizia* therefore presents a significant irony: in Renaissance society, *women*, not men, were often understood to represent the greatest potential source of shame for their family, and as a result, their behavior and social interactions were most highly surveilled, if they were even permitted outside the home at all.⁹² In the comedy, it is Nicomaco who embodies the source of familial shame and who threatens the chastity of the young girl in his household, resulting in an ironic reversal of the customary division of these gender roles. His transgressions therefore threaten to bring about a self-inflicted loss of honor: Nicomaco’s abdication of his patriarchal role signifies a void in the obligation to protect his family, and in

⁹¹ Yael Manes suggests that the expectation of a profitable (future) marriage was a principal motivation behind Nicomaco’s decision to wait until *Clizia* was officially married before enacting his scheme to bed her, arguing that *Clizia*’s pre-marital loss of chastity would effectually lower her value in the “marriage market,” which would inevitably have a negative impact on the family’s status and future prosperity. Manes, *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities*, 44.

⁹² Strocchia, “Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities,” 43-47; Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 371-372.

consequence, it is his wife, Sofronia, who must assume this responsibility of defending both Clizia's chastity and the family's honor.

Sofronia's acknowledgement of the threat that Nicomaco poses to his own household arises in her very first scene of the play (II.2), during the couple's initial argument about Clizia's future. Having spent much time and energy in raising her, Sofronia feels wholly invested in the young girl, calling her "una fanciulla buona, d'assai, e bella" and stressing a sense of obligation to Nicomaco by emphasizing their hard work in raising her—"abbiamo durato fatica ad allevarla."⁹³ In economic terms, Clizia would have represented an investment for the family, much like any other marriageable daughter in Renaissance Italy: her future potential as a bride held the power to forge social connections and improve the family's financial prospects. Sofronia's framing of the issue to her husband as a matter of responsibility attempts to appeal to Nicomaco's desire to arrange a socially suitable match for one so "good" and "beautiful," presenting it first as a duty, but also as an issue of public perception and esteem, declaring "dove prima ogni uomo ci lodava, ogni uomo ora ci biasimerà, veggendo che noi la diàno ad uno ghiotto, senza cervello."⁹⁴ Here, her fear that their larger community will revoke their positive opinion of the family as a result of her husband's folly becomes most evident, revealing the important role that public opinion played in their domestic affairs. Notably, her apprehension regarding Clizia's prospects are expressed through the language of praise and censure, in which the act of blame (*ci biasimerà*) follows the act of seeing (*veggendo*): Sofronia is anxious that such an unsuitable marriage for Clizia will negatively impact their community's assessment of the family. Again, losing positive public recognition would have had an immediate effect on the family's reputation and in consequence,

⁹³ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3. ("... a girl who's very good and pretty, whom we've brought up with a lot of trouble," trans. Gilbert, 832.)

⁹⁴ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3. ("... so that even though earlier everybody praised us, now everyone will blame us, since we'll be giving her to a guzzler, with no brains," trans. Gilbert, 832.)

damage their financial prospects as well. In warning him of this very possibility, Sofronia attempts to remind Nicomaco of his social and familial obligations with the aim of influencing his behavior. In this scene, as elsewhere in the comedy, Nicomaco rejects her warnings and dismisses her concerns, which provokes her threat to create a scandal herself: “o io dirò tanto male e commetterò tanti scandoli.”⁹⁵ Finally taking the matter into her own hands, Sofronia’s ultimatum foreshadows her eventual scheme to use scandal to her advantage in order to shame her husband into changing his behavior.

In the spirit of this ultimatum, this scene marks a significant turning point in Sofronia’s attitude and approach towards the situation. After failing in her one-on-one confrontations with Nicomaco, it has become clear that she requires a more radical approach that will manipulate the very social forces that threaten her family in the first place: honor, shame, and the threat of ridicule. By applying her wit, intelligence, and imagination to devise a humiliating spectacle, Sofronia invents a remedy that will ultimately serve as a control mechanism to regulate Nicomaco’s private behavior before it becomes an irreparable stain on the family honor. What Sofronia requires in her effort to save her family is the influence of the public, a key component in the honor-shame paradigm.⁹⁶ In other words, the power of shame derives from the observation of others, particularly in those cultural environments where ethical, social, and even political systems are structured

⁹⁵ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3 (“Or I’ll say so many bad things and stir up so much scandal,” trans. Gilbert, 834.)

⁹⁶ The literature on honor and shame as fundamental social forces is vast. Several studies have informed my understanding of this subject including Halvor Moxnes, “Honor and Shame,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 23.4 (1993): 167-176; Christina H. Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato’s Gorgias and the Politics of Shame* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), in particular 143-171; Peter N. Stearns, *Shame: A Brief History* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017), especially his chapter, “Shame and Shaming in Premodern Societies,” 10-48; and Andrew P. Morrison, “The Eye Turned Inward: Shame and the Self,” in *The Many Faces of Shame*, ed. Donald L. Nathanson (New York: Guilford Press, 1987), 271-291. For the Italian context, I am indebted to Strocchia, “Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities,” 39-60.

around notions of honor and pride.⁹⁷ Moreover, in early modern societies the inculcation of shame was one of the primary tools available to control behavior and maintain social hierarchies, inevitably producing a number of creative means by which controlling bodies (local governments, religious institutions, family and social groups, and so on) could induce feelings of shame within an individual.⁹⁸

Sofronia's newly devised plan to shame Nicomaco relies on the visual power of spectacle. In cultures like that of the Italian Renaissance, where shame serves as a powerful mechanism of control ultimately depend on external sanctions to enforce good behavior, collective control is maintained through the inculcation of honor and shame and by the threat of social ostracism when certain behaviors induce dishonor.⁹⁹ A close analysis of the language in *Clizia* demonstrates the use of terminology that engages with this particular cultural framework. For example, the word *onore* (honor) and its derivatives appear in every act, primarily in the form of the verb *onorare* (to honor), used to denote the act of showing respect to another, as well as the adjective *onorevolmente*, used to modify verbs describing respectful behavior. The term is typically ascribed either to a person through the use of possessive adjectives.¹⁰⁰ Again, the primary tensions of the

⁹⁷ The concept of a "shame society" advanced largely the work of anthropologist Ruth Benedict in her seminal 1946 study of Japanese cultural norms, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, which sought to better understand the distinction between cultures that rely heavily on shame (Japan, for example) and those that rely instead on guilt (like the United States). Though Benedict's work and its cultural assumptions have been scrutinized and challenged in subsequent decades, her work is still cited as a pioneering study in this arena. See Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1969), 222-ff.

⁹⁸ Gundersheimer, "Renaissance Concepts of Shame," 34.

⁹⁹ Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 224. Interestingly, Benedict explains that in the Japanese language, "a man who knows shame" may be translated as "virtuous man," or even "man of honor," further emphasizing the close association between these concepts (particularly in Japanese culture).

¹⁰⁰ For example, Machiavelli, *Clizia*, V.2: "La dovrebbe anch'ella pensare all'onore tuo," ("She too'll have to think about your honor," trans. Gilbert, 860); as well as IV.1: "Come è egli possibile che mia madre sia stata sì poco avveduta, che la si sia rimessa a questo modo alla sorta d'una cosa, che ne vadi in tutto l'onore di casa nostra?" ("How can my mother have been so little on the watch as to turn herself over to chance in this way, about a thing on which the honor of our house entirely depends?" trans. Gilbert, 847).

comedy hinge on this very axis, offering a glimpse of the underlying concerns of Renaissance society related to individual behavior, collective judgement, and the risks of transgressing the status quo.

Most importantly, when the prime method for enforcing social conformity was enacted through the loss of reputation or honor, any action that would expose the individual to the contempt or ridicule of his consensus reality would feel intolerable. It is this act of ridicule that ultimately provokes the feeling of shame: it represents a transgression witnessed, and through that witnessing, the misdeed is refracted back onto the individual via public humiliation and ridicule. Benedict provides a succinct description of this phenomenon: “A man is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or by fantasizing to himself that he has been made ridiculous.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, the climax of the play’s action centers around this very idea, as Sofronia’s final success arrives in the moment she induces Nicomaco’s humiliation. To this end, she devises a scheme that will allow her to exploit the cultural norms that structure her society, especially the predominance of an established, patriarchal masculinity that privileged male strength and dominance in both domestic and public affairs, and condemned, through public humiliation and loss of honor and status, those who failed to meet such standards. Such themes were often treated in Italian comedy: *Mandragola*’s Messer Nicia represents one notable example, a derisible character whose apparent impotence was mocked by Callimaco and Ligurio (II.6), evidence of his insufficient masculinity and failure to assert patriarchal dominance at home.

It is interesting, then, that Sofronia’s plan unfolds off stage. The audience learns of the night’s debacle through its retelling, first by Doria (Sofronia’s maid) in V.1 and then by Nicomaco himself in V.2. This second-hand narration recalls a similar scene in *Mandragola* (V. 4), in which

¹⁰¹ Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 223.

Callimaco recounts to Ligurio *his version* of his successful night with Lucrezia. While both scenarios call into question the reliability of their narrators, in each case the audience's inability to directly observe the action further emphasizes the supreme importance and value of eyewitness testimony. The spectators do not witness Nicomaco's humiliation firsthand but are instead invited to partake in the ridicule that follows it by laughing at him alongside the servants and other members of the household. In this way, Machiavelli further emphasizes the role of ridicule in Nicomaco's ultimate redemption, revealing the centrality of laughter to Sofronia's plot to humiliate Nicomaco when we discover just how carefully she orchestrated her scheme in order to induce riotous laughter in the face of his embarrassment. Ridicule is a performative act that aims to bring individual shame into the public domain, to put it on display at the expense of the person who is ridiculed. As Jure Gantar has argued, "A sense of humour enables us to notice the Other, whereas a gift for ridicule also enables us to perform its alterity to everyone else,"¹⁰² and thus, ridicule, performativity, and spectacle are all tightly correlated. Importantly, while ridicule exists in a myriad of forms, one of its most crucial aspects is its connection to laughter. Indeed, the word itself is etymologically related to the Latin (and later, Italian) *ridere*, meaning to laugh.¹⁰³ Indeed, Nicomaco's humiliation reaches its climax precisely in the moment following the grand *inganno* carried out by his wife and household, in which his shame is uncovered for all to observe.

The presence of laughter predominates the play's denouement, exemplified in the final act's opening monologue by Doria, Sofronia's loyal servant girl and aid-de-camp in the scheme to undo her husband. Doria begins recounting the night's events with specific emphasis on the hilarity of the situation evident in her very first lines:

¹⁰² Jure Gantar, *Pleasure of Fools: Essays in the Ethics of Laughter* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 71. Gantar subsequently names Machiavelli's "keen knack for ridicule" (72).

¹⁰³ Gantar, *Pleasure of Fools*, 71.

Io non *risi* mai piú tanto, né credo mai piú *ridere* tanto; né, in casa nostra, questa notte si è fatto altro che *ridere*. Sofronia, Sostrata, Cleandro, Eustachio, ognuno *ride*. E si è consumata la notte in misurare el tempo, e dicevào: —Ora entra in camera Nicomaco, or si spoglia, or si corica allato alla sposa, or le dà la battaglia, ora è combattuto gagliardamente. —E, mentre noi stavamo in qu questi pensieri, giunsono in casa Siro e Pirro, e ci raddoppiorno le *risa*; e, quel che era piú bel vedere, era Pirro, che rideva piú di Siro: tanto che io non credo che ad alcuno sia tocco, questo anno, ad avere il piú bello, né il maggiore piacere. [...] Ma ecco fuori egli e Damone. Io mi voglio tirare da parte, per vedergli, ed avere materia di *ridere* di nuovo.¹⁰⁴ (my emphases)

In this soliloquy, Doria uses the verb *ridere* and its nominal derivation (*le risa*) seven different times in describing the comedy of the night's events. She specifically comments upon the collective laughter of the household, which has brought them the greatest pleasure (“il maggiore piacere”) they have had all year. Moreover, as Doria explains, during the course of events the group narrated to each other the progression of the humiliation with the explicit intent to provoke even more laughter. Her repeated use of the superlative “mai piú tanto” also hints at the extreme nature of the joke played on their master, which sought, by Sofronia's design, to match Nicomaco's own excessive desires. The scheme takes the form of an elaborate bed-swap in which another household servant, Siro, takes Clizia's place before Nicomaco himself swapped with Pirro, Clizia's intended husband. With the help of the entire household, Sofronia's plan succeeds: after Nicomaco's would-be lover rebukes his advances all night long, Siro reveals himself to his

¹⁰⁴ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, V.1. (“I never laughed so much before and I'm certain I'll never laugh so much again; in our house there has been nothing but laughing all night. Sofronia, Sostrata, Cleander, Eustace, everybody laughs. And they have spent all night in measuring the time, and they say: 'Now Nicomaco's going into the room, now he's undressing, now he's lying down by the bride, now he's attacking her, now he's meeting strong resistance.' And while we were thinking about these things, Siro and Pirro came into the house and made our laughter double. And what was finer still was [Pirro, who laughed more than Siro] so much that I don't believe anybody, this year, can have had better fun or more of it [...] But see, [Nicomaco] and Damone have come out of the house. I'm going to step to one side and watch them, to get something else to laugh about,” trans. Gilbert, 857.) Here I have taken the liberty of editing Gilbert's translation, marked with brackets, in order to capture the more literal meaning of the original Italian.

disgraced master, making faces and vulgar gestures (*il manichetto*) at him while the other members of the household mock his every move. The audience, in listening to Doria describe the night in such comedic terms, becomes primed to interpret the events through a comic lens, to laugh alongside these characters and to partake themselves in the derision of the humiliated patriarch.

This particular type of laughter embodies what theorist John Wright has deemed “visceral laughter,” elicited as a reaction to a situation *in extremis*, whereby the audience has a visceral response to the occurrence of a shocking, violent, or disturbing thing, and simultaneously receives reassurance that it is acceptable to laugh about it. As a result, such laughter establishes a reciprocal relationship with the audience by providing context and conveying meaning.¹⁰⁵ As Martinez notes, the dark humor of the play “tests the generic limits of comedy,”¹⁰⁶ and so through Doria’s interpretation of the night—one full of laughter and apparent merriment—the audience is invited to join in the humiliation of Nicomaco as well. Yet this collective laughter does not merely signal these characters’ amusement at Nicomaco’s expense but acts as a catalyst for change as well. Indeed, the intermezzo that precedes V.1 (which is identical to the *canzona* that follows act III of Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*) hints at this very idea:

Sì suave è lo inganno,
Al fin condotto immaginato e caro,
Ch’altri spoglia d’affanno,
E dolce face ogni gustato amaro!
O rimedio alto e raro,
Tu monstri el dritto calle all’alme erranti;
tu, col tuo gran valore,
nel far beato altrui, fai ricco Amore;¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ John Wright’s study of physical comedy offers four types of laughter elicited in an audience: the recognized laugh, the visceral laugh, the bizarre laugh, and the surprise laugh. According to Wright, the Italian tradition of *Commedia dell’arte* provides the clearest reference for the visceral laugh, though *Clizia* seems to offer an earlier antecedent. See his “Introduction: About Laughter,” in *Why is That So Funny?: A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 3-23, in particular 5, 12-13.

¹⁰⁶ Martinez, “The Benefit of Absence,” 118.

¹⁰⁷ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, *canzone* between acts IV and V. (“Pleasant indeed is the trick, carried on to the dear conclusion that has been dreamed of, that takes one out of distress and makes sweet every bitter thing that

In these lines of verse, the *inganno* and the remedy go hand-in-hand, elaborating a rhetoric of cause and effect that alludes to the prepotent power of laughter, as Doria will confirm in the subsequent scene. As the old adage goes, laughter is the best medicine, and by introducing the final act with these familiar lines, Machiavelli further links the two—remedy and laughter—to gesture toward the plot’s final resolution. The “pleasant” nature of the trick thus reveals itself, not for Nicomaco, certainly, who suffers an emasculating blow to his reputation by the end of the night, but for those who witness his folly and ultimate humiliation for their own enjoyment.

It is this very presence of this laughter that works to provoke that same sense of shame in Nicomaco that Sofronia had earlier failed to produce herself. Even when Nicomaco, in hoping for a sympathetic ear, recounts his humiliation to his friend and aide Damone, Nicomaco’s story only elicits even more laughter. In a stark contrast to Doria’s gleeful retelling, Nicomaco tearfully divulges to his friend the whole sordid tale, yet Damone’s immediate reaction is not empathy but delight:

NICOMACO:	Ah, Damone, tu te ne ridi?
DAMONE:	E’ m’incresce assai di questo caso; nondimeno egli è impossibile non ridere. ¹⁰⁸

The staged juxtaposition of these two distinctly visible emotions—disgraced misery, on one hand, and amusement and pleasure on the other—may trigger a series of mixed emotions in the audience as well: pity and empathy, perhaps, for Nicomaco’s shame and the predicament he now faces, and amusement, even relief, now that his lustful mania seems to have been cured. Thus Damone’s response, to laugh at his friend’s predicament, embodies the likely reaction of the audience as well,

has been tasted. Oh restorative splendid and rare! You show the straight path to wandering souls; you with your great power by making others blessed make Love rich,” trans. Gilbert, 857.)

¹⁰⁸ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, V.2. (“Oh, Damon, are you laughing at me?” / “I feel sorry enough about this affair; still it’s impossible not to laugh,” trans. Gilbert, 589).

expressing a shared commiseration as well the impossibility of not laughing in the face of such farce.

Doria's narration of events in V.1 contrasts in significant ways with Nicomaco's version in V.2, yet significantly, both center on the experience of laughing. The apposition of these two accounts thus invites the audience to consider first what it feels like to laugh, and then, what it feels like to be laughed at. Nicomaco's own words speak to the heart of this contrast:

Questo è il mal mio, che toccherà a ridersene a ciascuno, ed a me a piangerne! E Pirro e Siro, alla mia presenza, or si dicevano villania, or ridevano; dipoi... se n'andorno, e credo che sieno iti a trovare le donne, e tutti debbono ridere. E così ognuno rida, e Nicomaco pianga!¹⁰⁹

Here as well, Machiavelli foregrounds the juxtaposition of the two actions *ridere* and *piangere*, further emphasized by the shared use of the pronoun particle *ne* in the first sentence: *ridersene*, *piangerne*. While both *ridersene* and *piangerne* refer to the same antecedent (Nicomaco's misfortune), the use of these two contrasting verbs highlights the very different reactions to Nicomaco's suffering. This opposition repeats at the end of the line ("ognuno rida, e Nicomaco pianga") to underscore yet again this powerful contrast of emotions. For Nicomaco, then, the laughter of his entire household at his expense represents the ultimate disgrace: his humiliation witnessed not only by others, but by his social inferiors. That they laugh at him and will likely go around finding others to join in—a fear stressed by his use of the verb *ridere* five different times his one line of dialogue—represents the final provocation that forces in Nicomaco both a change of perspective and a change of behavior. As he begins to see himself as the others do, Nicomaco finally grasps the scope of his folly and the dishonor it threatens to bring upon his family.

¹⁰⁹ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, V.2. ("This is my misery, that everybody'll have to laugh about it, and I'll have to weep, and in my presence Pirro and Siro sometimes talked insultingly, sometimes laughed, and then... they went off, and I believe they've gone to find the women, and they'll all laugh. And so everybody laughs, and Nicomaco weeps," trans. Gilbert, 860.)

In the final one-on-one encounter between the couple (V.3), Sofronia reaffirms the power of shame and the role it played in forcing Nicomaco to realize the disgrace in behavior:

Io confesso avere condotti tutti quelli inganni, che ti sono stati fatti, perché a volerti fare ravvedere, non ci era altro modo, se non giugnerti in sul furto, con tanti testimonii, che tu te ne vergognassi, e dipoi la vergogna ti facessi fare quello, che non ti avrebbe potuto fare fare niuna altra cosa.¹¹⁰

As this passage makes clear, Sofronia turned to public shaming as a last resort; in her words, “non ci era altro modo”—there was no other way, if not to bring forth his humiliation at the hands of many witnesses. Only then would Nicomaco be forced to face his corrupt behavior, because Sofronia made it an inescapable fact. In these lines, she uses the verbs *vergognarsi* (to be ashamed) and *ravvedersi* (reform or mend one’s ways), whose reflexive quality emphasizes the psychological component of Nicomaco’s shame and eventual redemption. Importantly, Sofronia’s syntax here illustrates that it was shame (*la vergogna*) that prompted Nicomaco’s recognition: “dipoi la vergogna ti facessi fare quello, che non ti avrebbe potuto fare fare niuna altra cosa.” Here the subject of the active verb is not Sofronia, nor the servants, nor does it come from Nicomaco himself, and the verb itself (*fare*) is causative: *shame* made Nicomaco do what nothing else would.

The comedy thus ends in a complete reversal of the social hierarchy, marking a decisive fall from power for the family patriarch. As Damone advises, Nicomaco must now submit to the will of his wife, to do whatever she wants him to do—“A me pare... che tu ti rimetta tutto nelle mani di Sofronia tua, e dicale che, da ora innanzi, e di Clizia e di te faccia ciò che la vuole.”¹¹¹ The

¹¹⁰ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, V.3. (“I confess that I’ve managed all those tricks that have been played on you because, if I was to make you come to your senses, there was no other way than to get so many witnesses to your actions that you’d be ashamed, and then shame’d make you do what nothing else could,” trans. Gilbert, 861.)

¹¹¹ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, V.2. (“It seems to me... that you’ll have to give yourself into the hands of your Sofronia, and tell her that from now on she can do as she likes about Clizia and about yourself,” trans. Gilbert, 860.)

verb *rimettersi* (here meaning ‘to submit oneself’ to another) signals Nicomaco’s final capitulation. It appears that Sofronia’s plan has succeeded, that she has rescued her family from the brink of ruin. Sofronia’s cleverness prevailed over her husband’s folly, counteracted his self-serving scheme, and subsequently overcame his position of authority. Indeed, Cleandro had foreshadowed this very conclusion in I.1, observing that his mother’s *astuzia* (astuteness) had so far succeeded in keeping Nicomaco in check—“benché Nicomaco sia più di autorità, nondimeno l’astuzia di mia madre. [...] ha tenuta la cosa in ponte più settimane.”¹¹² Cleandro’s early remark set the stage for the play’s ultimate confrontation between husband and wife, and certainly foreshadows to its outcome. Sofronia’s astuteness also finds direct correlation in Machiavelli’s *Principe*, chapter 18, in which the author uses the same exact term (*astuzia*) to characterize the manipulations necessary for an ideal prince to maintain the appearance of integrity while controlling the minds of men:

Quanto sia laudabile in uno principe mantanere la fede e vivere con integrità e non con astuzia, ciascuno lo intende: nondimanco si vede per esperienza, ne’ nostri tempi quelli principi avere fatto gran cose che della fede hanno tenuto poco conto, e che hanno saputo con l’astuzia aggirare e’ cervelli delli uomini; e alla fine hanno superato quelli che si sono fondati in su la lealtà.¹¹³

According to Machiavelli, the pretense of integrity remains the fundamental key to success, maintained in appearance but violated when necessary and always behind closed doors. The ability to dissemble therefore becomes an essential element of one’s overall *astuzia*, and to this point, the word itself appears a total of five times throughout *Il Principe*, most often in association with the act of dissimulation or as a complement to another critical trait, foresight—a testament to the

¹¹² Machiavelli, *Clizia*, I.1. (“And though Nicomaco has more authority, nevertheless my mother’s shrewdness [*astuzia*] and the help of the rest of us, which we give without much exposing ourselves, have kept the affair hanging many weeks,” trans. Gilbert, 828.)

¹¹³ Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 144; Manes also cites this passage in Manes, *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities*, 46-7.

preeminence of the concept in Machiavelli's overall thought.¹¹⁴ As Machiavelli explains in the treatise, "E li uomini universali iudicano più alli occhi che alle mani"¹¹⁵—that is to say, men believe what they see for themselves and appearances, not the material reality, are what matters in the minds of the people.

What, then, can we make of the author's decision to deny his audience the opportunity to witness Nicomaco's humiliation in real time? Machiavelli, as with Cesare Borgia's spectacle in Cesena and Sofronia's scheme in the comedy, maintains total control over who sees what, when, and where. He understood the inherent superficiality of appearances, which itself problematizes the act of seeing. By denying *Clizia*'s audience the opportunity to witness for themselves the events as they happened to Nicomaco, he underscores the fact that they have not seen, and therefore do not truly know, the reality of what transpired. In her shrewdness, Sofronia understood the importance of attenuating the possible consequences of public humiliation. She is constantly aware that the honor of her household remains intrinsically tied to that of her husband; any dishonor he brings upon the family will thus be a fate shared by all. Nicomaco had reminded her of this fact when she first threatened him with "tanti scandoli" (II.3) through a calculated repetition of the first-person plural "we":

Facciamo, per tua fé, le cose d'accordo, ché, se *noi* entriamo in
cetere, *noi* saremo la favola del popolo [...] sarebbeci modo a

¹¹⁴ The word *astuzia* is found in *Il Principe*, chapter 9 (in reference to power acquired through "astuzia fortunata," and in regard to the elites, "essendo quelli più vedere [foresight] e più astuzia"); in chapter 18, discussed above; and in chapter 20 (to explain how and why a prince should "nutrirsi con astuzia qualche inimicizia"). Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 88, 90; 144; 174.

¹¹⁵ Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 148. ("in general men judge more with their eyes than with their hands," trans. Gilbert, 66-67.) As Gilbert notes, this dictum suggests the expression "to touch with the hand," found in *Mandragola*, V.2, meaning "to know with certainty" (NICIA: "Volli toccare con mano come la cosa andava"; "I wanted to touch with my hands how the thing was going," trans. Gilbert, 817).

raccapizzare questa cosa, e che *noi* non ci facessimo tenere pazzi?¹¹⁶
(my emphases)

In Italian, the subject pronoun is not required, and in fact, is most typically omitted; Nicomaco's repeated use of the pronoun *noi* thus serves as an explicit reminder of their shared fate. Indeed, Nicomaco's framing of the problem as shared ("ours") echoes Sofronia's lament in the same scene—"dove prima ogni uomo *ci* lodava, ogni uomo ora *ci* biasimerà" (my emphasis).¹¹⁷ Damone's final words of comfort to Nicomaco also reiterate this idea: "La dovrebbe anch'ella pensare all'onore tuo, perché, sendo suo marito, tu non puoi avere vergogna, che quella non ne partecipi."¹¹⁸ Bound by marriage, Sofronia would not only share in Nicomaco's shame, but as Damone puts it, she would *participate* in it as well, a cooperative verb that suggests a psychological complicity, however undeserved, in Nicomaco's sins. Sofronia therefore has a keen understanding of the high stakes in her plan to humiliate Nicomaco, and so circumvents that very outcome through her astute and careful planning. She devises a scheme that openly shames her husband while also maintaining control over the extent of the scandal in order to limit its boundaries.

Therein lies the brilliance of her counterplan: her orchestration of a contained spectacle, its objective her husband's humiliation at the hands of his social inferiors, *but not his peers*. She achieves this aim by restricting who witnesses the affair first-hand, ensuring that only those within the household see Nicomaco's humiliation, and thus only they perform what we might define as the purifying act of ridicule. This experience results in what Kenneth Bennett and Dana Sutton have called the "catharsis of comedy," a process initiated most effectively by the presence of

¹¹⁶ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3. ("Let's agree, on your honor, because if we keep up this nonsense, we'll be the laughingstock of the town [...] Isn't there any way for putting an end to this thing, and not making people think we're crazy?" trans. Gilbert, 834.)

¹¹⁷ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, II.3. ("So that even though earlier everybody praised us, now everybody will blame us," trans. Gilbert, 832.)

¹¹⁸ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, V.2. ("She too'll have to think about your honor, because, since you are her husband, you can't be disgraced without her sharing in it," trans. Gilbert, 860.)

ridicule. Again, the play's resolution centers around Nicomaco's exposure to ridicule via the laughter of his household, the means through which he is purged of his vice and restored to virtue. Such purgation "will best occur when the object of the laughter is the same as, or appreciably similar to, the source of the bad feelings being purged."¹¹⁹ Nicomaco's self-serving, foolish, even predatory behavior pushes this comedy to the limits of the genre, where the comic and tragic elements of the play coalesce in the staging of his punishment and eventual redemption.

To return to the biographical context that opened this chapter, I argue that *Clizia* concludes with a dual rehabilitation for the *senex amans*. Machiavelli's representation of his own senescent passions provides him the opportunity to dramatize his failures through an on-stage surrogate, yet it is only the shared experience of ridicule that purges and absolves them both of socially untenable behaviors. In this way, Machiavelli recasts the teleology of spectacle: moving from a purely political sphere to a private and interpersonal one, the author demonstrates the power of spectacle to act as a catalyst for positive change and an opportunity for redemption. At the same time, the author denies the audience their voyeuristic moment—they witness neither Nicomaco nor Machiavelli's humiliation firsthand—which serves to remind the spectators that they can never know the truth behind the gossip, calling into question their position as spectator while reconfiguring his own role as the object of their gaze. Machiavelli, constrained by his exile and imprisoned within his mind, sought to relieve himself through his comedies. As he wrote in the prologue to the *Mandragola*, Machiavelli identified himself as one who "s'ingegna con questi van' pensieri far il suo tristo tempo più suave, perché non have dove voltare el viso."¹²⁰ In these works,

¹¹⁹ Sutton's argument centers on the connection between laughter and the relief of tension, which calls to mind Anthony Ashley Cooper's assessment in his treatise *On the Freedom of Wit and Humor*: that in the face of constraint, resourceful men will turn to comedy as a source of relief. See Dana F. Sutton, *The Catharsis of Comedy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), in particular 33-39 and 41-45, cit. 42.

¹²⁰ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, prologue. ("... is striving with these trifling thoughts to make his wretched life more pleasant, for otherwise he doesn't know where to turn his face," trans. Gilbert, 778.)

self-reflection and self-deprecation become dramatized for the mutual benefit of author and audience. Machiavelli becomes spectator to the performance of his own flaws through the character of Nicomaco: laughing along at his staged disgrace, that process of comic catharsis experienced by the audience transfers to its author as sublimation. Nicomaco's rehabilitation thus becomes Machiavelli's restoration. Accordingly, we have seen how the heightened presence of laughter in the play generates and reinforces Nicomaco's shame but also how this laughter functions to rehabilitate him in the comedy's final resolution, through the carefully orchestrated, internal spectacle of that ridicule. Sofronia's household takeover proposes a new path towards recovery through rational action to recast the patriarchal model. As Machiavelli attempted to negotiate, if not mitigate, the tensions, constraints, and indignation suffered in his later years, *Clizia* appears to have embodied the remedy.

Chapter Three: Purgation and Renewal in Aretino's *Cortigiana* (1525)

‘e canterò di quel secondo regno
dove l’umano spirito si purga
e di salire al ciel diventa degno.’

—Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio* I, 4-6

While Machiavelli's native Florence is often considered the so-called birthplace of the Renaissance, by the turn of the sixteenth century, the city of Rome had become its beating heart. As the burgeoning center of culture and power in Italy, the ascendancy of the Eternal City was in large part a revival of Humanism's return to classical models of art, literature, and political ideals.¹ Thanks to a renewed attention to the arts and culture, Italy's most talented artists, writers, and thinkers flocked to Rome in order to curry favor with the elite patrons who might offer financial support and other material benefits. Many of these artists and writers would eventually establish themselves at the Roman papal curia, the principal court of the Holy See. Among them was one

¹ A number of excellent studies examine the history and culture of Renaissance Rome; Charles Stinger's *The Renaissance in Rome* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998 [1985]) is foremost among them. Stinger notes that theater in particular had a "special appeal" thanks to the primacy of ceremony and spectacle in Roman public and cultural life. Under Pope Leo X (r. 1513-1521) especially, the revival of classical Roman drama transformed into a full-fledged cultural phenomenon, where Rome arose as a leading center for producing new and original comedies (288-9). In addition to Stinger, historical and cultural guides on Renaissance Rome include P.A. Ramsey, ed., *Rome in the Renaissance: The City and the Myth. Papers of the Thirteenth Annual Conference*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 18 (Binghamton, NY: 1982); Thomas Dandele, *Spanish Rome, 1500-1700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); and especially Peter Partner, *Renaissance Rome 1500-1559: A Portrait of a Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979). Partner's book in particular offers a comprehensive study of the society and culture of the city during the sixteenth century and includes a number of critical insights that will resurface throughout this chapter.

Pietro Aretino, who arrived in the city as a young man of notable ambition looking to leave the circumstances of his birth behind in order to make a name for himself at the court of Rome.²

The Renaissance court was a central, though fairly new, feature of early modern life, having transitioned from the itinerant kingdoms of the Middle Ages to an institution of fixed location where a ruler and his entourage would reside. This new, rooted nature of the court also established an institutional identity and culture that had not previously existed with the medieval model.³ In Rome, the papal court was also somewhat anomalous, due in part to the legacy of the Donation of Constantine, an eighth-century document known as the most famous forgery in European history which granted the Holy See both secular and spiritual power.⁴ The decree granted the papacy, the

² Paul Larivaille offers a thorough accounting of the various hypotheses surrounding Aretino's family origins, a truth which the author famously obscured. Born in Arezzo on April 20, 1492, Aretino advanced one theory that he was the illegitimate son of an Aretine *gentiluomo*, Luigi Bacci, though later in life he would admit to others that his father was a local *calzolaio*. The truth is still unclear, though the author's last name is taken from the city of his birth, rather than from any parentage to which he laid claim. See Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1997), 11-24.

³ Paola Ugolini, *The Court and its Critics: Anti-Court Sentiment in Early Modern Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 4. The scholarship on the Renaissance court is extensive. For this chapter, in addition to Ugolini's work on anti-courtliness, historical and cultural guides include Cesare Vasoli, *La cultura delle corti* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1980); Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Sergio Bertelli, Franco Cardini, and Elvira Garbero Zorzi, eds., *The Courts of the Italian Renaissance*, trans. Mary Fitton and Geoffrey Culverwell (New York: Facts on File, 1986), on court spectacle, see especially 128-187. Norbert Elias's seminal work, *The Civilizing Process* (first published in 1939), is also foundational to our understanding of the role of the court on development of social and cultural norms; Elias argues that which we today call "civilized behavior" first developed in the societies of the Renaissance court, marking a pivotal moment in the transformation of cultural and civic life of European society. For an examination of Elias's theories on the court, see Jeroen Frans Jozef Duindam's *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court*, trans. Lorri S. Granger and Gerard T. Moran (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994); their analysis of court hierarchies and the status competition they generated is a useful complement to Ugolini's study of anti-courtliness (see in particular 137-158).

⁴ The legal document known as the "Donation of Constantine" purported to be a decree by the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great that entitles Pope Sylvester a number of imperial privileges and granted the papacy a great swath of territory, including the Lateran Palace and Rome itself. It was almost universally accepted as genuine from the ninth to the fifteenth century, at which time the Italian humanist and philologist Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) disproved its validity with his 1440 *Declamatio de falso credita et ementita donatione Constantini*, or *Discourse on the Forgery of the alleged Donation of Constantine*. Dante, who believed in its authenticity, considered the Donation to be the root of the corruption of the Church and refers to it explicitly in Canto XIX of the *Inferno* (vv. 115-117). See Lorenzo Valla, *The Treatise of Lorenzo*

seat of God's vicar on earth, an actual territory over which to reign, thereby rendering it the most powerful institution in western Europe.

During those centuries following the Donation, the papal court under the rule of the Holy See had grown not only in temporal power but also in wealth. As Peter Partner notes in his comprehensive overview of the Roman court during the Renaissance period, it was the only court considered equal in prestige to the other royal courts of Europe and was certainly singular among the courts of Italy.⁵ Indeed, by the sixteenth century, the Roman papal court had become the preeminent locus for ambitious humanists, and especially for those who did not come from aristocratic or wealthy families. The Roman court offered a greater chance at career advancement in comparison to the ever-volatile political life of the Italian communes and attracted many writers, artists, and scholars in search of fame and fortune. *La Cortigiana's* Messer Maco exemplifies this ambitious opportunity-seeker, having come to Rome with the explicit intent of climbing the social hierarchy by first becoming a cardinal.⁶

The various domestic and administrative offices of the papal palace included the College of Cardinals as well as the papal prelates. The number of members of the *famiglia palatina*, or papal household, grew rapidly during the Renaissance period.⁷ Pope Pius II (1458-1464) had

Valla on the Donation of Constantine, ed. and trans. Christopher Coleman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922, 1960).

⁵ See especially chapter four, "The Roman Court and the Papal Palace," in Partner, *Renaissance Rome*, 113-132.

⁶ As Maestro Andrea explains in I.2, "Voi non potete essere cardinale si prima non diventate cortigiano" [you can't be a cardinal if first you don't become a courtier], thereby setting the stage for the elaborate trick he will play on Maco. In this chapter, all citations of the 1525 edition of *La Cortigiana* come from the critical edition by Giuliano Innamorati; see Pietro Aretino, *La Cortigiana*, ed. Giuliano Innamorati (Turin: Einaudi, 1970). References are to act and scene. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated, though Campbell and Sbrocchi have published a fine translation with critical annotations that have been an excellent resource for this chapter. See Pietro Aretino, *La Cortigiana*, trans. J. Douglas Campbell and Leonard G. Sbrocchi (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 2003).

⁷ The *famiglia palatina* consisted of the pope's domestic and administrative officials, as well as a number of officials who enjoyed the title "familiars" or "permanent members of the household," who in turn might

approximately 150 familiars as well as some eighty servants in his household; during the pontificate of Leo X (1513-1521), there were 418 familiars and 265 servants—an entourage of nearly 700 individuals. A significant part of this expansion was due to the number of officials who claimed the right to their own entourage; one cardinal in particular—Cardinal Alfonso Carafa—maintained a staff of fourteen familiars, along with five horses. As the sixteenth century progressed, the papal household continued to grow, reaching numbers greater than 1000 during the pontificate of Pius VI (1559-1565).⁸ It was a bloated and cumbersome organization that bred ambition as easily as venality and vice; opportunities for misconduct abounded. In such an environment, the interests of courtiers, cardinals, and staff coincided as often as they clashed, and the court grew ever riper for discontent at all levels of the hierarchy.

Such was the situation at the Roman court by the time of Aretino's arrival on the scene, during the papacy of Leo X.⁹ Born Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici (b. 1475), Leo X was the first Medici pope and brought his cultural sensibilities and passions with him to Rome. He filled his court with humanists, including the eminent scholar Pietro Bembo, who served as secretary to the pope, and extended his patronage to many artists and writers who advanced his grand cultural program at the papal court and beyond. Significantly, Leo X was also an important patron of the

have their own familiars. The head of the papal household was known as the *maestro di casa*, who oversaw a large staff of chamberlains, masters of the wardrobe, grooms, gendarmes, and many other officials, stewards, and servants. This system contributed to the rapid growth of the Roman court during the sixteenth century. See Partner, *Renaissance Rome*, 117-118; 121-122.

⁸ Partner notes that this grandiosity did not go unnoticed or unchecked, as certain contemporary reformers advocated for a smaller (and less expensive) household. The extraordinary numbers seen under Pius IV prompted him to reduce the papal *famiglia* to around 600 individuals, which was maintained during the subsequent pontificate of Pius V (1566-1572); see Partner, *Renaissance Rome*, 118.

⁹ Leo X was well-known as an extraordinary patron of the arts, following in the footsteps of his father, Lorenzo "Il Magnifico" de' Medici (1449-1492). Thanks to Leo's financial support, Rome became the new cultural center of Italy, and indeed of all Europe. Carlo Falconi offers a fascinating account of Giovanni de' Medici's life in his monograph, *Leone X: Giovanni de' Medici* (Milan: Rusconi Libri, 1986), situating Leo X's role as a patron of cultural and artistic endeavors during his papal tenure.

theatre, following his family's tradition of promoting culture and art as a means of elevating the family's status among its aristocratic rivals.¹⁰ Thanks to the revival of theater that began a decade or so earlier at the Este court of Ferrara,¹¹ many of the prominent artists now in Rome also demonstrated a keen interest in dramaturgical pursuits. Leo fostered this developing interest by funding a series of spectacles at the onset of his pontificate as well as the construction of a new theater on the Capitol Square. During his tenure, he would go on to sponsor a number of renowned theatrical performances, namely Bibbiena's *Calandria* (1514), Ariosto's *Suppositi* (1519), and Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (1520). Such productions elevated the cultural profile of the Roman court to revival that of the great Renaissance courts at Ferrara and Urbino, creating promising conditions for Pietro Aretino's own efforts several years later.¹²

The Roman curia also became a central point of reference in Aretino's own life and artistic pursuits. Much of his work throughout his life would focus on court life, even as he finally left it behind to settle in Venice in the early 1530s. From his earliest sonnets and first comedies to his

¹⁰ On the matter of Medici patronage and the family's efforts to promote a cultural program as a means of pro-Medici propaganda, see the seminal work by Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000); the value of spectacle as a political tool is also discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

¹¹ The Ferrarese court is credited with being among the first sites of this renewed interest in theater; among performances of classical Roman plays, Ludovico Ariosto also composed two original comedies, *La Cassaria* (1507) and *I Suppositi* (1508), considered the earliest of the new *commedia erudita* genre. See Giulio Ferroni, *Storia della letteratura italiana. Vol. II: Dal Cinquecento al Settecento* (Milano: Einaudi, 1991), 113.

¹² Alas, when Leo X died in 1521, the advancement of his cultural program ceased as well. His pontificate was followed by the short-lived reign of Adrian VI (1522-1523), who sought to reform the Church and purge it of corruption and greed—not exactly the ideal patron of sumptuous spectacle. After Adrian's death, Clement VII (1523-1534) assumed the papacy, during which Rome suffered the ignominious Sack at the hands of Charles V and his army in 1527. Theater did not exactly thrive under these volatile conditions either. Aretino's life and circumstances would intersect significantly with each of these three men, the details of which will be explored later in this chapter. For more on the role of theater in Rome during the Renaissance, see Marga Cottino-Jones, "The Theatre in the Renaissance" in Ramsey, P.A. (ed.), *Rome in the Renaissance: The City and the Myth. Papers of the Thirteenth Annual Conference, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 18 (Binghamton, NY: 1982), 237-47; as well as Aulo Greco, "Roma e la commedia del Rinascimento," in *Studi Romani* 22.1 (1974), 25-35. Both Cottino-Jones and Greco note the flourishing theater culture under Leo X in particular.

later dialogues and eventual revised plays, a great deal of Aretino's writing dealt in anti-court invectives that earned the author a wide reputation as a biting satirist and *acerrimus virtutum ac vitiorum demonstrator*, an epithet he bore proudly.¹³ Indeed, Aretino demonstrated a keen awareness of the power of his pen and firmly grasped the reformatory potential of satire, as both a rhetorical and moral art. Following a long line of satirists of the Roman tradition,¹⁴ Aretino understood the purpose of satire as a corrective to all the errors, vices, and transgressions witnessed by the satirist himself. During the early modern period in particular, the connection between satire and remedy often led to comparisons between the satiric speaker and a doctor, wherein satire becomes the "bitter medicine" employed to cure society of its ills.¹⁵ As an ideal form of rhetorical persuasion, satire also aimed to persuade the audience to recognize those ills as it sought to correct

¹³ The Latin phrase has been interpreted in a number of different ways but can be translated literally as "the sharpest revealer of virtue and vice." The epithet comes from an inscription on Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving of Aretino as a young courtier in Rome (executed c. 1517-20), which is currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York). The sobriquet would accompany the writer's picture in subsequent portraits (most notably, inscribed on the frame of Sebastiano del Piombo's portrait of Aretino from c. 1525), and eventually reappears in the Marcolini editions of his *Lettere* (1538). The label is often mentioned in the scholarship on the author; see for example Laurie Shepard, "Petrus Aretinus Acerrimus Virtutum ac Vitiorum Demonstrator," in *Speaking Truth to Power*, eds. Jo Ann Cavallo and Carlo Lottieri (*Annali d'Italianistica* 36, 2016), 163-178. Shepard translates the epithet, which comes from a portrait engraving of Aretino by Marcantonio Raimondi, as "keenest voice of virtue and vice." In her article, she takes the position that Aretino comes into his satirical voice and gains the courage to "speak truth to power" only after his settlement in Venetian Republic; this chapter will argue that such courage is already present in the composition of the first *Cortigiana* of 1525, which Aretino wrote during his final days in Rome.

¹⁴ As the Roman writer Quintilian famously said, "Satira quidem tota nostra est" (satire is entirely our own), an acknowledgement of satire's distinctly Roman origins.

¹⁵ For a discussion of satire as remedy, see Robert C. Elliot, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1966), as well as Paola Ugolini, "Satire," in *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Marco Sgarbi (Springer International Publishing, 2016), 2-3. For a broader consideration of satire, see Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994). In the chapter "The Politics of Satire" (130-166), Griffin attempts to identify the particular historical conditions in which satire might arise and flourish; a challenging endeavor, as the author concedes. He does acknowledge that the rise of prose satire during the Italian Renaissance might have resulted, in part, from the rediscovery of those classical works of Roman satire. He also notes that satire also required a certain tolerance or even taste for ridicule among an author's readers (or spectators, in the case of theater), which seems to have been the case for Aretino's Roman audience in 1525, primed as they were by the tradition of satirical *pasquinate* also popular at the time. It also appears to be commonly understood as an urban form, also in line with the circumstances of Aretino's more satirical works.

them. In Aretino's *Cortigiana*, these aims appear to coalesce in his critique of both court and courtier, as he points his pen not only at the institution but also at the individuals within it. In this, Aretino found himself in the company of his fellow Renaissance humanists, who often believed that the reformation of institutions could only occur by first reforming individuals. James Hankins offers a convincing argument on this point, asserting that "politically, the Renaissance was an age of tyrants and oligarchs, rulers with often questionable ties to legitimacy. In the general wreck of ideologies and political legitimacy, it was natural that humanists of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries should turn their reforming energies to the individual."¹⁶ I would suggest that Aretino's intellectual activities can be situated along these lines as well; while the writer would not thwart the papacy itself, he was more than happy to advance scathing social critiques of the members of the Papal Curia and of courtiers in their service.

As the critical scholarship on the writer attests, Aretino's satirical works during those volatile Roman years relentlessly targeted the greed and hypocrisy of those at the top of the court hierarchy while lambasting the machinations of courtiers inhabiting its lower echelons.¹⁷ This chapter intends to build on this scholarship by expanding the analysis of Aretino's satirical

¹⁶ James Hankins, "Humanism and the Origins of Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 118-141, cit. 119.

¹⁷ This chapter is indebted to a number of seminal studies on Aretino's works, including his Roman period and his relationship to the theater, namely: Giulio Ferroni, *Le voice dell'istrione: Pietro Aretino e la dissoluzione del teatro* (Napoli: Liguroi, 1977), as well as Ferroni, "Pietro Aretino e le corti," in *Pietro Aretino nel cinquecentenario della nascita: Atti del convegno di Roma-Viterbo-Arezzo (28 settembre-1 ottobre 1992), Toronto (23-24 ottobre 1992), Los Angeles (27-29 ottobre 1992)*, vol. 2, (Roma: Salerno, 1995), 23-48; Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980) as well as Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* (Rome: Salerno, 1997); Mario Baratto, *Tre studi sul teatro: Ruzante, Aretino, Goldoni* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1964); Marco Faini, "'E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino': Pasquino, Aretino, and the Concealed Self," in Stefano Jossa and Ambra Moroncini (eds.), "Comedy, Satire, Paradox, and the Plurality of Discourses in Cinquecento Italy," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 40.1, Winter / Hiver 2017 (Special Issue): 161-186; Raymond Waddington, *Aretino's Satyr: Sexuality, Satire, and Self-Projection in Sixteenth-Century Literature and Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), as well as Waddington, *Pietro Aretino: Subverting the System in Renaissance Italy* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

critiques to examine, in particular, how the first edition of *La Cortigiana*, written in Rome in 1525, offered an antidote to the vice, venality, and folly of the Roman court. More specifically, I investigate the connection between Aretino's criticisms and the play's specific language and metaphors related to purgation, catharsis, and remedy to propose a fresh interpretation of the satirical orientation of the 1525 *Cortigiana*.

By harnessing the power of collective witnessing afforded by theater, Aretino exhibited the folly of the court to its very own members and underscored the message of the comedy by addressing it to them explicitly. Aretino had designed the satirical caricatures presented on the stage to mirror recognizable types and figures well known at court, initiating what was likely an uncomfortable recognition among the Roman spectators. In this way, the play exposes and castigates the greed, hypocrisy, and venality of the Roman court by targeting individuals who populated it, as Aretino channeled his "reforming energies," to reiterate Hankin's expression, into personal invective. Through a careful analysis of the play, we shall see how the playwright prompts the theatergoers to recognize themselves on stage, thereby creating the possibility of *anagnorisis*, Aristotle's term for this moment of recognition. In the *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher defines *anagnorisis* as "a change from ignorance to knowledge." It is therefore moment of transformation, one that works best when "accompanied by a reversal," that is, "a change from one state of affairs to its exact opposite."¹⁸ The 1525 *Cortigiana*—as distinguished from the later 1534 edition, which Aretino revised and published in Venice—establishes the parameters for just such an occurrence among its spectators, as part of the comedy's "argomento molto ristorativo,"¹⁹ as Aretino describes

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics* 11, ed. Michelle Zerba and David Gorman (New York and London: Norton, 2018), 15-16.

¹⁹ Though a double entendre is at play here, the expression can be translated literally as "a very restorative subject matter." The phrase comes from the prologue of the 1525 *Cortigiana*, which will be examined at length later on in the chapter.

it in the prologue. Through this process of *anagnorisis*, the audience moves from ignorance to awareness, purged of their obliviousness as well as their vice; a project of reformation, in other words. While satire has often been considered in terms of cause and effect, this reading of Aretino's *Cortigiana* aims to bring new meaning to the notion of satire as "corrective medicine."

As Paola Ugolini's work illustrates, *La Cortigiana* should also be situated within a broad tradition of anti-court literature: writings that recorded sentiments of disillusionment, distrust, pessimism, and contempt aimed at the court were a widespread feature of Renaissance culture.²⁰ Interestingly, however, Aretino's satires were often anti-courtier as much as they were anti-court, seen most notably in his pseudo-anonymous pasquinades that centered on the rapaciousness and vice of the Papal Curia and the courtiers who served there. These works gave voice to Aretino's own frustrations at court, where as a courtier and poet, he often felt undervalued and stifled by the hierarchies of power. *La Cortigiana* follows these earlier efforts, merging his discontent with the court itself with critiques of the various flatterers, hypocrites, and scoundrels that made up the courtier class, a parasitic cycle of exploitation that features prominently in the play's two intertwining plots.

In order to arrive at a fuller understanding of *La Cortigiana* as literary antidote, this chapter will first examine the author's Roman period more broadly, with particular attention to his early anti-court satires and pasquinade poetry. These early efforts evidence the author's long-standing commitment to offering himself as a voice of truth in a world of falseness and deceit. *La Cortigiana* in its original, unrevised form as Aretino composed it in 1525 thus represents the theatrical manifestation of Aretino's experiences during these Roman years in a way that the 1534 edition

²⁰ See Paola Ugolini, *The Court and Its Critics: Anti-Court Sentiment in Early Modern Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

does not, and indeed cannot, replicate. Finally, this chapter considers the 1525 *Cortigiana* not only as a satirical comedy that highlights the *ad hominem* transgressions of the Roman court, but also as a work that explicitly engages its Roman audience through a direct, localized call to recognize and reject the allure of vice common to court society in the early sixteenth century.

Aretino in Rome: Finding a Voice in Pasquino

Before turning to the analysis of the comedy, it is worth examining more thoroughly Aretino's early years in Rome as a backdrop to the frustrations and critiques he elucidates in *La Cortigiana*. Born in Arezzo in 1492, Pietro Aretino arrived in Rome sometime around the year 1517 as a young man with hopes of finding success as a writer and courtier at the Roman court. He first established himself in the household of the prominent banker and patron of the arts, Agostino Chigi (1466-1520),²¹ who provided the young writer access to like-minded humanists as well as to the papal court of Leo X. Thanks to his close financial ties to the papal coffers, Chigi's enterprise eventually led him to become one of the richest houses in Europe, which gave him to the resources to establish himself as one of the greatest patrons of the arts in Renaissance Italy.²²

²¹ Nicknamed "il Magnifico," Chigi belonged to a wealthy Siennese banking family and was the first to move the family's financial enterprise beyond the limits of provincial Siena, thanks to his successful dealings in Papal Rome which began to flourish under Julius II (b. Giuliano della Rovere, 1443-1513). For an excellent study on Chigi's contributions to Rome's Renaissance "Golden Age," see: Ingrid D. Rowland, "Render Unto Caesar the Things Which are Caesar's: Humanism and the Arts in the Patronage of Agostino Chigi," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39. 4 (1986): 673-730. Rowland offers insight into Chigi's overall cultural project, examining three commissions with Raphael for which he remains best known. She argues that these commissions were explicitly designed to realize a "monumental expression of Chigi's *persona*" (673). Rowland's comments bear a striking similarity to those of Raymond Waddington, whose book *Aretino's Saytr: Sexuality, Satire, and Self-Projection*, examines Aretino's own efforts at cultivating a specific literary persona (that of the truth-telling satyr). It stands to argue that Chigi's *modus operandi* had undoubtedly impacted Aretino's own intentional crafting of a literary persona, aware as he must have been of the "definite but elusive relationship between public image and actual power" (Rowland, 676). See also Waddington, *Aretino's Saytr* (2004), in particular 91-116.

²² Chigi is perhaps best remembered for commissioning the Villa Farnesina, located in the Trastevere neighborhood of Rome, where Aretino lived and worked during his early years in Rome. Chigi supported a number of artists and writers who would later enjoy the patronage of Leo X; beyond his tutelage of

It was thanks to Chigi's connections to the papacy that Aretino was able to later establish himself as court poet to Leo X.²³ Upon Chigi's death in 1520, Aretino thus found himself in an ideal position to be able to seek patronage directly from the Medici family; first, from Leo X, and then after Leo's death in 1521, Aretino turned to Leo's cousin, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici (1478-1534), who would become Pope Clement VII in 1523. Not much is known about Aretino's life in Rome prior to Chigi's death in 1520, beyond what Aretino himself mentions in his correspondence, preserved in the six-volume collection which he later published in Venice between 1538 and 1557 (the final volume having been published posthumously). In these letters, Aretino always refers to Chigi in the most laudatory terms. From these epistolary acknowledgements, it appears that Aretino retained fond memories of his time under the patronage of the Chigi household and held its master in the highest esteem, even decades after his death.²⁴

Aretino's profound disillusionment with court life and with Rome in general thus came later, following the death of his friend and patron, when the writer would need to rely solely on the precarious support and magnanimity of the Medici family. The year 1521 therefore marked a turning point in Aretino's early career; with Chigi deceased more than a year, he was now forced

Aretino, Chigi also patronized the works the artist Raphael (b. Raffaello Sanzio, 1483-1520) and the architect Baldassare Peruzzi (1481-1536), among others. His household functioned as a sort of private, "minor" court in the socio-cultural ecosystem of sixteenth-century Rome. It is important to recognize that during this period, this Roman "court" system was pluralistic rather than centralized, fostering what Richard Andrews described as a confusing mix of "conflicting power bases," which in turn generated a "fierce struggle for wealth, influence, security, and protection, with 'masters' and 'servants' at all levels exploiting one another (Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 66).

²³ Biographer Carlo Falcone even goes as far as to assert that Chigi and the Medici pope were so close, "per stima e considerazione reciproca, per questioni finanziarie e politiche, eguaglianza d'ideali e di vita," that Leo X had no other friend outside the Papal Court whom he held more dear. Chigi had provided financial support to the Medici during the difficult period of their exile from Florence, which turned out to be a keen moment of foresight for Chigi, as the Medici resumed power in 1512 and Giulio de' Medici became Pope Leo X the following year. Falcone, *Leone X*, 525.

²⁴ In an earlier letter, from 1526, he identifies himself as "creatura del magnifico Agostin Chisi [Chigi]" (P. Aretino, n. 264, *Lettere*, vol. 2, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1997-), 295); in a later one (1537), he alludes to "le Magnificenzie di Agostin Chisi," (Aretino, n. 323, *Lettere*, vol. 1, 445; and elsewhere (1548), to "il buon Chisi Agostin," (P. Aretino, 389, *Lettere*, vol. 4, 246).

to contend with the premature death of Leo X, which triggered a papal conclave to choose his successor and thrust the Roman court into deep uncertainty. As part of his loyalty to the Medici family, inherited from Chigi, Aretino endeavored to promote the candidacy of Giulio de' Medici (cousin to Leo X) by composing vicious satirical poems aimed at discrediting Giulio's rivals. Some of these sonnets take aim at the reactions to the slanderous pasquinades by the Roman court, and in particular by the College of Cardinals, and thereby demonstrate the nascent power of Aretino's pen to call the attention of Rome's elites.²⁵ Nevertheless, Giulio would not win the conclave, and thus upon the election of the Flemish pope Adrian VI—"the least loved of all the popes"²⁶—Aretino found it best to leave Rome prior to the new pontiff's inauguration. Fortunately for both Pietro Aretino and Giulio de' Medici, Pope Adrian VI was old and in poor health; he died only nineteenth months after assuming the papacy, in September 1523. Following a brief conclave, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici was elevated as Pope Clement VII in November 1523, at which point Aretino felt the conditions in Rome had returned to his favor.²⁷ But the situation would not remain

²⁵ One example of these critical satires is the sonnet "Dice ognuno: 'Io stupisco che 'l Collegio,'" to which I will return momentarily. Written during the 1521 conclave, this sonnet exemplifies Aretino's antagonistic attitude toward the Roman court while also illustrating the author's strategy of self-promotion. To underscore the role Aretino played in antagonizing the College, he names himself explicitly more than ten times in twenty verses (note, for example, the first four lines: "Dice ognuno: «Io stupisco che 'l collegio / non possa far tacer Pietro Aretino / e sí rinasco a sentir l'Aretino / predicar tutti i vizi del collegio»." The sonnet can be found in Aretino, *Operette politiche e satiriche*, vol. 2, ed. Marco Faini (Rome: Salerno, 2012), 70-71. For a discussion of Aretino's pasquindes as the author's construction of public self, see also Marco Faini, "'E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino": 161-185, in particular 166-169. Larivaille also discusses this period in Aretino's career in Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 70-79.

²⁶ Born Adriaan Florensz (1459-1523), Pope Adrian VI had a very short tenure as the Holy See, serving as pope for only a year and a half. He had a particular disdain for the earthly aspects of the papacy, preferring to spend his time in prayer and studying rather than tending to the business and political affairs that defined the papacy in the sixteenth century. Many of his traits were attributed to the fact that he was a foreign pope, and in fact, the College of Cardinals would not elect another until 1978, with the election of the Polish Pope John Paul II. See Judith Hook, *The Sack of Rome* (London: MacMillan, 1972), 19-20, cit. 19.

²⁷ Giulio de' Medici reigned as Pope Clement VII from 1523 until his death in 1534. Much has been written about Clement's pontificate, especially in light of the devastating 1527 Sack of Rome that occurred on his watch, during which he was imprisoned for nearly half a year. For a comprehensive examination of Rome during Clement VII, I recommend the edited volume, *The Pontificate of Clement VII: History, Politics, Culture*, eds. Kenneth Gouwens and Sheryl E. Reiss (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

peaceful for long; Aretino would continue to express his discontent with the Roman Court, and his reputation as a fierce exposé of virtue and vice only increased with time. In addition to his efforts to integrate himself at the Roman court, during these early years Aretino also endeavored to establish himself as a critical satirist through a popular genre of satire known as *pasquinate*, or *pasquinades*. While satire existed long before Aretino came to the genre, these *pasquinate* were a unique contemporary invention, written anonymously and expressed through a unified figure—or to borrow Marco Faini’s description, “a collective mask”—known as ‘Pasquino.’²⁸

The history of Pasquino is as colorful as it is obscure.²⁹ According to the historical record, Pasquino began his story as a battered statue—missing arms, legs, and nose—which had been fixed on a pedestal by one Cardinal Oliviero Carafa and placed in the corner of the Roman *palazzo* that he inhabited. The statue also found itself in proximity to the procession in honor of the annual feast of St. Mark on April 25, and as part of these celebrations, locals would costume the statue in the guise of a mythological figure that changed from year to year. The statue’s disguise eventually became the focus of anonymous poems that their authors would append to the figure, often under the cover of darkness to further cloak their identity. While it is unclear how the practice began, documentary evidence shows that the practice would continue to evolve and increase with time (one document from 1509 testifying to the presence of 3000 poems). The origin of the name

²⁸ Marco Faini, “E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”: 163.

²⁹ On the discovery of Pasquino and Aretino’s adoption of the Pasquino persona, see Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 57-60, cit. 57; as well as the aforementioned essay by Faini, “E poi a Roma ognuno è Aretino,” and Peter Burke, *A historical anthropology of early modern Italy: Essays on perception and communication* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, 1987), 109. The scholarship on the *pasquinate* is itself quite vast; for the most important studies on the subject, see in particular: Luigi Morandi, “Pasquino e Pasquinate,” in *Nuova antologia di scienze, lettere ed arti* 3.19 (1889): 271-300; Alessandro Luzio, “Pietro Aretino e Pasquino,” in *Nuova antologia di scienze, lettere ed arti* 112.16 (1890): 679-708; Valerio Marucci, “L’Aretino e Pasquino,” in *P.A. nel cinquecentenario*, 67-86; and Mario Dell’Arco, *Pasquino e el pasquinate* (Milan: A. Martello, 1957). More recently, the edited volume by Chrysa Damianaki, Paolo Procaccioli, and Angelo Romano, *Ex marmore: Pasquini, pasquinisti, pasquinate nell’Europa moderna* (Rome: Vecchiarelli, 2006) offers some critical insights as to the genre’s development across centuries.

‘Pasquino’ is also uncertain, with one source suggesting that the appellation was borrowed from a local schoolteacher who went by the same name.³⁰ It seems that sometime in the intervening twenty years, the figure of Pasquino came to represent a sort of *portavoce* for the various discontents of the Roman populace. The authors of the anonymous pasquinades would often adapt and tailor their compositions to take aim at a variety of subjects depending on the ebb and flow of current events.³¹ Indeed, the pasquinade was quite unpredictable in terms of subject matter as well as form; there existed varieties written in prose and verse, in Latin or the vernacular, composed in a number of different styles and linguistic forms, and in various metrical schemes.³² As the tradition evolved, collections of *pasquinate* began to circulate both in manuscript and in print, attesting to their continued popularity among the Roman audience as well.³³

Aretino would soon become the most well-known author of these allegedly unsigned satires, an association that he worked equally hard to promote. As scholars have noted, Aretino was particularly drawn to the anonymous figure that Pasquino represented. Having no particular identity of his own (let us recall that his surname “Aretino” was taken from the town of his birth), he found it especially useful as part of his strategy for promoting himself as a writer and satirist.³⁴ Although pasquinade satire existed prior to his arrival in Rome, Aretino was quick to recognize

³⁰ Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 57-58.

³¹ Given the Roman context, anti-clerical themes were a common feature of the pasquinades, though not until 1514; in fact, in 1513, the year in which Giovanni de’ Medici became Pope Leo X, the predominant theme in these verses was hope, and in particular, “la speranza nella virtù del nuovo papa.” By the following year, however, the tone seemed to shift as pasquinades appeared featuring themes that were variously anti-Florentine, anti-Medicean, and anti-court, a development that began with the sonnet “Non ha papa Leone tanti parenti.” Dated to 1514/1515, this was the first known sonnet to exhibit a satirical, anti-curial sentiment, and is thus considered to be a prototype for the development of the pasquinade genre that followed (Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 59).

³² Faini, “E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”: 172-175.

³³ Angelo Romano, “La satira di Pasquino: Formazione di un genere letterario,” in Damianaki, Procaccioli, and Romano, eds., *Ex marmore: Pasquini, pasquinisti, pasquinate nell’Europa moderna*, 11-34.

³⁴ On this point, see Faini, “E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”; as well as Marucci, “L’Aretino e Pasquino.”

the potential in this plastic form of literary expression. By the 1521 — and in particular, during the tumultuous period surrounding the 1521 papal conclave—Aretino’s name had become almost universally linked to the genre, though it remains unclear as to how this may have occurred, largely because the works attributed to Aretino prior to this year are both scarce and of dubious origin. Aretino’s early pasquinade production thus represents a critical moment in the author’s creation of his public and literary persona and becomes an essential component to understanding many of the themes treated by the author in *La Cortigiana*, themes which he first explored in his critical satires.³⁵

The practice of these earlier pasquinades provided Aretino with a useful communicative model, though his own contribution to this tradition was partly a reversal of it. Rather than reveling in the supposed anonymity provided by the figure of Pasquino, Aretino took great pride in being associated with it, going as far as to foster that very connection in the pasquinades he composed, evidenced in a number of sonnets that date to this period. In one example, “Confessio Petri Aretini ad Cardinales” (c. 1521), Aretino concludes the sonnet with a direct association between his satirical attacks and those of Pasquino, a strategy he would later deploy in the first *Cortigiana*. In the poem’s final lines, the author asserts the synonymy between his name and that of Pasquino: “Sí che, collegio bello, / perdonati di core all’Aretino / se Dio vi scampi e guardi da Pasquino” [“So, handsome college, / forgive Aretino with all your heart / so that God may spare you and keep

³⁵ Again, Marucci offers an extraordinarily insightful examination of Aretino’s pasquinade production and how it intersected with the other prominent *pasquinisti* of the period (namely Antonio Lelio). Marucci argues that one of Aretino’s especially decisive and important contributions to this genre of poetry was “la scoperta del suo possibile uso social ed extraletterario continuato e funzionale, a vantaggio personale [...] della progressive fuoruscita dalla subalternità di cortigiano attraverso la scrittura, non per la ‘altezza’ artistica di questa, ma specificamente per i suoi significati, per i suoi messaggi”; Marucci, “L’Aretino e Pasquino,” 85. I argue that this innovative “use” of literature is further developed in the first *Cortigiana* and aims explicitly, as Aretino states in the 1525 prologue, at bringing to the audience “un argomento molto ristorativo” that will help aid them in their own eventual escape from subordination.

you from Pasquino”].³⁶ The conclusion also implies the threat his verses pose for the College of Cardinals, ironically addressed as “collegio bello.”

The author’s self-described talent in the art of *dir male* was another common theme among these earlier sonnets and often went hand-in-hand with their characteristically sardonic tone, as seen in the opening lines of the same sonnet, “Confessio Petri Aretini ad Cardinales”:

Savio collegio, *miserere mei*!
Peccavi, io lo confesso: ho detto male.
 Ma qual fia sí indiscreto cardinale
 che non assolva i dolci versi miei?³⁷

Here, the mockingly ingratiating tone underscores Aretino’s contempt for the College, which is heightened by the false “confession” he offers them for the alleged sin of *il dir male*, a transgression for which he ostensibly seeks forgiveness. The ironic twist lies in the act of asking for absolution from those cardinals he most likely maligned in the first place. Such strategies—the juxtaposition of contriteness and vitriol as well as the overt ingratiation of the subject—feature prominently in *La Cortigiana* as well, while sonnet’s direct address to the College of Cardinals calls to mind the similar style of discourse found in the 1525 prologue (recall: “Vostre Signorie mi son patrone [...] mi burlo con voi che sète nobilissimi, costumati e virtuosi”). From these limited examples, it is evident how Aretino’s literary experimentation with the *pasquinades* served as a sounding board for the style and themes he would later expand upon in the comedy.

It is also important to note the extent to which these *pasquinades* were considered to represent a collective voice of dissent by the Roman people, who had grown increasingly indignant

³⁶ Aretino, *Operette satiriche e politiche*, 72; the translation is Marco Faini’s (See Faini, “E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”: 168).

³⁷ Aretino, *Operette satiriche e politiche*, 71. (“Wise college, have mercy on me! I sinned, I do confess it: I spoke ill. / But who will be such an indiscreet cardinal / that he will not absolve my sweet verses?”) The translation here is also Faini’s, though I have revised his translation of “ho detto male” as “I spoke badly,” which I translate as “I spoke ill.” See Faini, “E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”: 167.

at the venality and corruption of the Papal Court. Because Aretino had linked his own literary persona so tightly with the figure of Pasquino, he soon arose as the *portavoce* of a discontented populace. The historical moment was ripe for it. As Paul Larivaille has asserted, by the end of the papal conclave in early January 1522, it appeared that “la fama di Pietro è cresciuto al punto di far di lui il *legato* designato dal *popolo* romano, il portavoce in qualche modo ufficiale della protesta popolare” (original emphases).³⁸ Arguably, Aretino’s adoption of the role of righteous spokesperson on behalf of Rome’s discontents may have likewise inspired him to compose the first *Cortigiana* in 1525, especially when we consider the common themes and strategies that emerge from these texts.

Aretino’s poetic pasquinades thus track the development of his satirical voice, as many of the motifs explored in them surface not only in *La Cortigiana*, but throughout the whole of his literary corpus.³⁹ I call attention now to one final pasquinade that exemplifies this spirited combination of antagonism and wit that would similarly inhabit the first *Cortigiana*. Aretino’s sonnet, which dates from the period surrounding the 1521 papal conclave, ostensibly derides other

³⁸ Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 77.

³⁹ Anti-court sentiment arises in his early comedies, *La Cortigiana* as well as *Il Marescalco*, but also pervades his later dialogue, *Ragionamento de le corti* (1538). Though Aretino had been far from any court, Roman or otherwise, for some time, the resentment and disillusionment of his earlier years in Rome continues to roar in the *Ragionamento*. As one interlocuter, Piccardo, asserts, “La corte, messeri miei, è spedale de le speranze, sepoltura de la vita, baila de gli odii, razza de l’invidie, mantice de l’ambizioni, mercato de le menzogne, serraglio de i sospetti, carcere de le concordie, scola de le fraudi, patria de l’adulazione, paradiso de i vizii, inferno de le virtù, purgatorio de le bontà e limbo de le allegrezze.” [The court, my good sirs, is the hospital of hopes, the tomb of life, the tribunal of hate, the progeny of envy, the bellows of ambition, the market of lies, the harem of suspicions, the prison of concord, the school of fraud, the fatherland of adulation, the paradise of vice, the inferno of virtues, the purgatory of goodness, and the limbo of joy.] Characteristic of his other work, here Aretino’s juxtaposition of terms turns oxymoronic to further underscore the contradictory nature of the court. The imagery in this particular passage seems to suggest that time spent at court extinguishes one’s humanity (the court as *sepoltura de la vita*), condemning one to an afterlife (*paradiso*, *purgatorio* or *inferno*) full of discontent and regret. See *La ragionamento de le corti* in Aretino, *Operette politiche e satiriche*, vol. 1, ed. Giuseppe Crimi (Rome: Salerno, 2013), 77-162, cit. 84; for a useful critical edition of this work, see also Aretino, *La ragionamento de le corti*, ed. Fulvio Pevere (Milan: Mursia, 1995).

pasquinade poets who seek to exploit Aretino's renown in service of their own literary ambition, while simultaneously (self-) congratulating the author for his skill and notoriety in the art of *il dir male*:

Dice ognuno: << Io stupisco che 'l collegio
non possa far tacer Pietro Aretino
e sí rinasco a sentir l'Aretino
predicar tutti i vizi del collegio >>.

Oh credete voi bestie che 'l collegio
non abbia altri pensier che l'Aretino
e che ei non rida quando l'Aretino
qualche sicurtà piglia del collegio?

E poi in Roma ognuno è l'Aretino
ognun si mangia in pasticci el collegio
e il più tristo boccon n'ha l'Aretino.

Ma se la reverenzia del collegio
non fusse stata ingrata all'Aretino
in ciel sarebbe a quest'ora el collegio.

Pur a tempo è il collegio
e se vol farsi schiavo l'Aretino
faccia or cubiculario l'Aretino.

Se non, Pietro Aretino
dirrà poi sei parole del collegio
et ecco in rotta Pietro col collegio.⁴⁰

Larivaille offers one compelling interpretation of the sonnet's most famous tercet ("E poi in Roma ognuno è l'Aretino / ognun si mangia in pasticcio el collegio / e il più tristo boccon n'ha l'Aretino"), which speaks to Aretino's likely frustration with the apparent anonymity of the

⁴⁰ Aretino, *Operette politiche e satiriche*, vol. 2, 70-1. ("Everybody says: "I am amazed that the College / can't silence Pietro Aretino / and so I am reborn, hearing Aretino declare all the vices of the College." / Oh, do you beasts believe that the College / has no other thoughts besides Aretino / and that it doesn't laugh when Aretino / takes on the College? / And then, in Rome everybody is Aretino / everybody eats the College in his pasta / and Aretino has the saddest bite of all. / But if the College's regard / had not been ungrateful to Aretino / the College would now be in heaven. / Yet the College is just in time / and if it wants to make Aretino its slave / let it now appoint Aretino as *cubiculario*. / If not, Pietro Aretino / will then say six words about the College / and here breaks Pietro with the College," my translation.)

genre.⁴¹ According to Larivaille, in Rome where “everyone eats the College in his pasta,” the only significant difference between Aretino and his pasquinade comrades-in-arms lies in the fact that the “saddest bite” is always reserved for Aretino, that he alone shoulders the responsibility to denounce the corruption of the Curia, “un «boccone» rifiutato da tutti e che lui solo ha il coraggio di mandare giù.”⁴² Most notable, however, is the rhetorical strategy that the poet employs throughout the entirety of the composition: in the sonnet’s twenty verses, Aretino mentions his own name eleven different times and refers to the “Collegio” (College of Cardinals) another ten. Though the subject matter of the sonnet makes clear the antagonistic relationship between Aretino and the College, one tercet proves particularly revealing: “Pur a tempo è il collegio / e se vol farsi schiavo l’Aretino / faccia or cubiculario l’Aretino.” In the context of the Roman papal court, the *cubiculario* was one employed directly in service of the Pope himself, particularly those who provided help of the domestic sort, much like a housekeeper for the private Papal chambers.⁴³ In the juxtaposition of *schiaivo* (slave) and *cubiculario* (chamberlain, or chamber servant, in a secular context), Aretino blurs the lines between the forced, unpaid labor performed by a slave, defined by entirely by the enslaved person’s lack of freedom, and the docile servitude carried out by the *cubiculario* in the service of the Papal Court. Through this comparison, further emphasized by the rhetorical juxtaposition of the two main characters of the sonnet, Aretino and the *Collegio* are established in opposition to one another, or at the very least, they exist in a precarious relationship that threatens to disintegrate at any moment, as illustrated by the final verses (“... et ecco in rotta Pietro col collegio”). As we shall see, this tension resurfaces most notably in the prologue of the

⁴¹ In a contrary argument, Marco Faini offers a reading of these early poems that suggests Aretino appreciated the anonymity of pasquinade poetry and the effacement of the author it enacted, using this literary form as a “mask” through which to create a new literary persona. See Faini, “E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”: 161-185.

⁴² Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 78.

⁴³ Faini translates *cubiculario* as “papal chamberlain” in Faini, “E poi in Roma ognuno è Aretino”: 167.

first *Cortigiana*, when the playwright promises to entertain his privileged spectators while simultaneously derided them, a perilous dance that Aretino performs quite aptly through the comedy's biting humor and realistic portrayals of court life.

The ever-shifting sands of the Roman court also created a precarious environment where one's position was never stable or certain. Servants were subject to the whims and mercies of their masters; a courtier, court artist, or other humanist employed at court (like Aretino himself) served only at the pleasure of his guarantor. While the court provided a pathway towards a life of fame and fortune for a fortunate few—artists like Raphael and Michelangelo and professional humanists such as Pietro Bembo certainly knew success from their time at the Roman court—for the majority of the court retinue, it was often exhausting and demoralizing as they competed in an incessant battle for dwindling resources and limited power, reliant as they were on the good will of their patrons.⁴⁴ Aretino addressed these conditions in another well-known sonnet, *Lamento de uno cortegiano* ["A Courtier's Lament"], dated to the period surrounding the 1521 papal conclave, which offers an unvarnished perspective on the precarity of the courtier's experience. What is especially striking is Aretino's rhetorical approach in this poem. It functions as a wake-up call directed squarely at his fellow courtiers—a strategy he will resume shortly in *La Cortigiana*—which implores them to take account of their dire circumstances:

Pigliate esempio, o pazzi cortigiani,
afamati, infamati e desperati
che venti anni altrui date per due pani,

⁴⁴ The literature on the workings and systems of patronage in Renaissance Italy is vast. Mary Hollingsworth's *Patronage in Renaissance Italy: from 1400 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (London: J. Murray, 1994) offers a geographically oriented study of the subject, and her extensive section on Rome (225-297) has been particularly beneficial in illuminating the practices of patronage at the Roman court. While the pope remained at the very top of the court hierarchy, Hollingsworth's examination of the spending habits of wealthy cardinals is highly informative (see in particular 276-297). Another fascinating study of patronage practices can be found in Jonathan Nelson and Richard Zeckhauser's book, *The Patron's Payoff: Conspicuous Commissions in Italian Renaissance Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), which examines these practices through the lens of game theory.

non tante scarpe e guanti profumati
 ch'al fin la ninfa e 'l far tanto il Cupido
 prender vi sforza un abito da frati.⁴⁵

The poem concludes with the poet's declaration that he is freezing to death and starving, unable to buy a loaf of bread; his only currency is his misery, which cannot be exchanged for material goods.⁴⁶ The principal theme of the sonnet centers on the courtier's poverty, so extreme that he is left starving, desperate, and in disrepute ("afamati, infamati e disperati"). However, Aretino does not allow the courtier to position himself as blameless victim, subject to the whims and folly of the court. In the second of the two tercets, Aretino accuses the "pazzi cortigiani" of falling prey to the seductive lure of fame and fortune that a life at court had promised. Those courtiers who "play the nymph" and "act just like Cupid" ("ch'al fin la finfa e 'l far tanto il Cupido") are responsible for the consequences they now face, forced to take up "the friar's frock" to avoid further abjection ("prender vi sforza un abito da frati"). The irony of the verse is further emphasized when we recall that the ascetic friars of the mendicant orders took their vow of poverty voluntarily and in service of God, whereas the desperate courtier is forced into the friary as a sort of retributive, Dantean *contrapasso* for their venality and blind ambition.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ "Heed this example, you crazy courtiers, / starving, dishonored, and desperate / for you give up twenty years to others in exchange for two loaves of bread, / not many shoes or perfumed gloves / for, in the end, playing the nymph and acting just like Cupid / will force you to take up the friar's frock," Aretino, *Lamento de uno cortigiano*, vv. 34-39, in *Operette politiche e satiriche*, vol. 2.

⁴⁶ "In ponte vo', e moiomi di gelo / e la mula si può comunicare / e per la fame mi s'arricia il pelo / et anco un pane vorrei comperare / ma, per ventura mia, oggi non posso / trovar la mia moneta da cambiare. / Non è ducato, carlin, iulio o grosso / ma d'archimia, d'invidia, e per impronta ha la miseria e stampasi nell'osso," Aretino, *Lamento de uno cortigiano*, vv. 286-294, in *Operette politiche e satiriche*, vol. 2.

⁴⁷ The notion of "fare la ninfa" returns in *La Cortigiana* as well, during Maco's first "courtier lesson" with Maestro Andrea—though notably, it only appears in the 1534 edition of the comedy and is wholly absent from the 1525 redaction. In a famous scene from the 1534 *Cortigiana* (1.22), Andrea tells Maco that among the main things a courtier must know how to do, one must "saper [...] far la ninfa, ed essere agente e paziente" ["to know how to play the nymph, and how to be both active and passive"]. Maco returns to this idea later in the scene to ask, "Come si fa la ninfa?" ["How does one play the nymph?"] Andrea responds that any old roguish courtier can teach him and takes Maco's inquiry as an opportunity to offer another cutting portrayal of corrupt morality and hypocrisy at court. From Andrea's explanation, we learn that to 'play the nymph' means that one "consuma l'ore in su gli specchi in farsi i ricci et ungarsi la testa antica, e

Alongside the currents of anti-courtier critique, in the *Lamento* the author also conveys a sense of deep dissatisfaction and disappointment. Much like Aretino himself, would-be courtiers arrived in Rome with the expectation of wealth and its trappings (“tante scarpe e guanti profumati”) but instead would come to spend decades of their lives in service to others only to earn a bit of bread (“due pani”).⁴⁸ Importantly, the poem also gives voice to a moral imperative, embodied in its central character, a “once-successful, now impoverished and repentant courtier whose life mission is to disabuse prospective courtiers by denouncing the evils that the court hides under its façade of opulence,” as Paola Ugolini has described him.⁴⁹ While the *Lamento* lays bare the dire consequences of a life wasted at court, it is significant here that Aretino equally points the blame at those courtiers who allowed their ambition and the promise of fortune blind them to the realities of the court: “Ma può far questo il ciel, giovin perfetti, / che v’abbagli la Corte in tal maniera / che voi non consociate i suoi difetti?”⁵⁰ The *Lamento* thus demonstrates Aretino’s early inclination

col parlar Toscano, e co ’l Petrarchino in mano” [“consumes hours before his mirrors, playing the rich man and oiling his ancient head, talking in Tuscan and with his little Petrarch in hand”]. As in the *Lamento*, the accusation of ‘fare la ninfa’ appears to be linked to foolish posturing, blind ambition, and cupidity (in Aretino’s words, “far tanto il Cupido”).

⁴⁸ The focus on financial matters is a recurring theme in Aretino’s anti-court satires and features regularly in his correspondence as well. In his letters, he often thanked patrons or friends for sending him money or praised their magnanimity, which further underscored the unstable position, financial and social, in which Aretino found himself during his early period in Rome. His status as courtier and *protégé* forced him to continually rely on others and to demonstrate in more tangible ways his gratitude for their generosity and patronage, for example, through letters and other literary forms of praise. For someone seeking greater autonomy in their personal affairs, it was a certainly a balancing act; as Susan Gaylard has noted, Aretino’s letters often exhibit a complex negotiation on the part of the author between “demanding patronage and appearing autonomous” (see Susan Gaylard, *Hollow Men: Writing, Objects, and Public Image in Renaissance Italy* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2013), 132). Such tensions also resurface in the complicated dynamics between masters and servants in *La Cortigiana*.

⁴⁹ Paola Ugolini, *The Court and Its Critics: Anti-Court Sentiments in Early Modern Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 54. For a detailed analysis of this poem, see also Marco Faini, “Un’opera dimenticata di Pietro Aretino: Il *Lamento de uno cortigiano*,” *Filologia e critica* 32 (2007): 75-93.

⁵⁰ “But can the heavens allow it, o exquisite youth, / are you so dazzled by the Court / that you do not recognize its defects?” Aretino, *Lamento de un cortigiano*, vv. 109-111, in *Operette politiche e satiriche*, vol. 2.

towards sharp candor, and much like in *La Cortigiana*, we find that such unrelenting honesty comes likewise coupled with the objective of encouraging (self-)awareness and change.

I have lingered on these pasquinades to highlight the early context of Aretino's antagonistic approach towards the Roman court, which finds its apex in the first redaction of *La Cortigiana*, drafted at the height of these tensions. As we will see, the pasquinades have much in common with the rhetorical style and aims of the comedy, which *La Cortigiana* takes to new heights by enacting them on stage. This period also marked one of the most tumultuous of the writer's life; Aretino's time in Rome was about to come to an abrupt end, just as he was finishing the composition of what would become *La Cortigiana*'s first "draft."

While Aretino enjoyed some measure of success during his time at court, thanks to the positive rapport he cultivated with the Medici and their supporters in Rome, the relationship quickly soured within the first years of Clement's papacy, between 1523 and 1525. Though there were a number of contributing factors, including Aretino's growing disillusionment with the environment at the Roman court under Clement VI, the breaking point arrived in the wake of Aretino's involvement in what is now known as the "I Modi scandal."⁵¹ Although there remains some uncertainty regarding the precise chain of events, we know that sometime between 1524 and 1525, Aretino's friend Marcantonio Raimondi executed sixteen erotic engravings based on a series of drawings by the artist Giulio Romano. The engravings were deemed scandalous and were promptly banned, with Raimondi jailed as a result. Aretino viewed the entire situation as an act of censorship and an overreach of authority, and promptly set about petitioning Pope Clement,

⁵¹ Larivaille notes that what we know of the scandal comes to us from three differing quasi-contemporary accounts: one from Aretino himself in a letter written around the year 1537 (so, more than ten years after the fact); the second, from Lodovico Dolce's account in his *Dialogo della pittura intitolata l'Aretino* (1557); and finally, from Vasari's telling in his *Vita di Marcantonio Bolognese* (1568). Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 89-93.

eventually obtaining his friend's release. Yet Aretino's greatest influence would be exercised through his pen, when he expressed his indignation over Raimondi's treatment by composing a set of poems now known as the *sonetti lussuriosi*, which served to give voice to Raimondi's erotic engravings—an achievement of which Aretino would later boast in a letter to one Messer Battista Zatti da Brescia.⁵² Together with the subsequent composition of the first redaction of *La Cortigiana* (generally believed to have occurred sometime between February and May of 1525) along with several new satirical anti-clerical pasquinades, Aretino's literary efforts began to truly frustrate and antagonize the Papal Court, provoking in particular the powerful Giovan Matteo Giberti, datary to Pope Clement VII.⁵³

As is well known, Aretino's definitive break with the papal court of Rome came about in the form of an assassination attempt on the writer's life, ordered by Giberti and carried out between the 28th and 29th of July 1525. The event was detailed in a letter written by one Bishop Girolamo da Schio to Federico Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua: Aretino had been stabbed twice in the chest and was near death when he showed up on horseback in his hometown of Arezzo. He had likely sent word of his eventual arrival, which he anticipated as a result of the now-embittered relations in Rome (though he had probably *not* foreseen the coming attempt on his life). It should be noted that while Giberti forcefully denied any involvement in the affair and maintained his innocence

⁵² “Da poi ch’io ottenni da papa Clemente la libertà di Marc’antonio Bolognese, il quale era in prigione per aver intagliato in rame i *XVI modi* etc., mi venne volontà di veder le figure, cagione che le querele Gibertine esclamavano che il buon virtuoso si crocifiggesse; e vistele fui tocco da lo spirito che mosse Giulio Romano a disegnarle. E perché i poeti e gli scultori antichi e moderni sogliono scrivere e scolpire alcuna volta per trastullo de l’ingegno cose lascive, come nel palazzo Chisio [di A. Chigi] fa fede il satiro di marmo che tenta violare un fanciullo, ci sciorinai sopra i Sonetti che ci si veggano a i piedi.” Aretino, 308, *Lettere*, vol. 1, 424-5; cit. in Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 90.

⁵³ As Partner notes, the position of papal datary was a high-level (and lucrative) one, largely administrative but powerful nonetheless. We can assume that it was exceedingly unwise to provoke the hostilities of such a high-ranking figure, as Aretino would soon learn. See Partner, *Renaissance Rome*, 114-117.

for the rest of his life, Aretino remained wholly convinced of Giberti's guilt and further succeeded in convincing a number of important figures of it as well, including Federico Gonzaga.⁵⁴

Following the assassination attempt in 1525, Aretino spent the subsequent period wandering from Arezzo to Mantua to Urbino before finally settling in Venice in March of 1527, where he would establish himself for the remainder of his life. His break with the papal court therefore marked a definitive break with Rome herself. The history of Aretino's time in Rome thus attests to his often-complicated relationships with the ruling class, with patrons and artists, and with art itself. This early period provides the necessary context to our understanding of the circumstances in which Aretino wrote the first *Cortigiana*, and indeed proves essential to any convincing interpretation of the play itself.

Rome and the 1525 Cortigiana

The world of the Roman court and its courtiers is on full display in *La Cortigiana*. The comedy contains a double plot, a fairly common feature of the plays of the *commedia erudita* genre, although the two narratives intertwine only slightly in the unfolding of the play. We first encounter the story of the doltish and gullible Messer Maco, who wishes to become a cardinal. Having just arrived in Rome from Siena in pursuit of this ambition, Maco and his servant Sanese happen upon the wily Maestro Andrea, who informs Maco that he must first become a courtier ("voi non potete essere cardinale si prima non diventate cortigiano"⁵⁵) and offers himself as his teacher. Andrea proceeds to mock Maco's foolishness and naiveté through a series of "lessons" and pranks, including Maco's submission to the hot baths (*la stufa*) as part of the process of

⁵⁴ Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 115-8.

⁵⁵ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), I.2. ("You can't become a cardinal if you don't first become a courtier.")

“becoming” a courtier, and another involving a beautiful woman with whom Maco has fallen desperately in love, later to be revealed as a prostitute. The second, less developed plot details the story of Parabolano, a Neapolitan and former footman who rose in the ranks at court and now possesses an entourage all his own: the servants Rosso and Cappa, along with the steward Valerio and courtier Flaminio, who simultaneously loathe Parabolano’s newfound status (and accompanying arrogance) and benefit from it. Like Maco, Parabolano too falls in love, but with a married woman; in this case, it is his servant, Rosso, who schemes to deceive him with the help of the *ruffiana*, Alogia, resulting in Parabolano’s affair with a lowly baker’s wife. The action concludes as Parabolano and Maco are both humiliated by the tricks played on them in their attempts to satisfy their sexual desires.

With the Roman Court providing a broader structural framework and functioning as central motif in each storyline, these two plots run parallel to each other as they depict a reversal of power relations in which servants outsmart their incompetent masters, who in turn are blinded by their sexual desires and guileless ambition.⁵⁶ Aretino intentionally crafted this full cast of characters—which includes courtiers (green as well as wizened), a fishmonger, a tobacconist, and a baker, among others—to reflect the actual demographics of the city in 1520s, and so the ensemble would

⁵⁶ While *La Cortigiana* is an original work, these plot devices—servants outsmarting masters, women in disguise, men blinded by sexual desire—were common motifs in Renaissance comedy. They were largely taken from the newly rediscovered Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence that sparked the burgeoning interest in theater in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, adopted and adapted by the Italian Renaissance playwrights as a “repertory of movable parts,” famously defined by Louise George Clubb as “theatregrams.” This practice of *imitatio* combined with the practice of *contaminatio*, or the incorporation of material from the earlier Roman tradition, which was central to Renaissance literary culture. Even this praxis was modeled off the Romans, who borrowed source material from the Greeks who came before them. One of Clubb’s defining contributions here is her emphasis on the essential experimentation and innovation that accompanied playwrights’ use of these theatregrams; *La Cortigiana* is but one example among many others of the period. See Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare’s Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), in particular 1-26 and 29-48. On the centrality of imitation and intertextuality in Renaissance literary practice, see also Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

have been easily recognizable to a Roman audience. While it was exaggerated for comedic effect, the characters' the spiteful scheming and ambitious social climbing intended to mirror the dynamics of power both within and beyond the Roman court, further underscoring the realism of Aretino's satirical portrayals.

The context of the play's composition is equally important. Based on documentary evidence, scholars widely accept the hypothesis that Aretino composed the first edition (or "draft," according to some critics) of *La Cortigiana* sometime between February and July of 1525, just before he was forced to flee Rome following the attempt on his life in late July.⁵⁷ It was the first play Aretino ever wrote and appears to be the first significant piece of writing that he had attempted beyond his early pasquinades and more traditional portfolio of courtly poetry. While it remains unknown if the play in its original form was ever performed, it seems very unlikely, particularly in light of what Aretino endured in the period immediately following its composition. Even with a lack of information surrounding its performance history, critics nevertheless assume that Aretino had conceived the play for a single, distinct occasion with a particular Roman audience in mind, an assumption to which I shall return later in the chapter.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Scholars generally offer these parameters for the play's composition based on a number of historical facts. First, the play refers the events of the Battle of Pavia (24 February 1525), a military engagement between the French king Francis I and the Habsburg emperor Charles V; the French were soundly defeated and perhaps most importantly, the king was taken prisoner, an outcome Aretino mentions specifically in I.4 and in III.7. The inclusion of such a historical reference necessarily implies that Aretino wrote the play after these events occurred. Second, this first edition of the play includes a number of laudatory references to both Pope Clement VII and his datary, Giovan Matteo Giberti (seen, for example, in III.12, with Flaminio's acknowledgement of the "giustizia" of Clemente, and in V.7, with Valerio's allusion to "il Reverendissimo Datario"). Scholars have read these positive comments as a sign that the play occurred prior to Aretino's near death by assassination in late July 1525, which he presumed to have been ordered by the very same "Reverendissimo Datario," Giberti. The dating and historical context of the play is discussed in Innamorati's introduction to the 1525 edition in Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), 8; as well as in Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 102-8.

⁵⁸ This presumption is largely based on the number of extremely specific and topical indications present in the 1525 edition; see Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 73.

For reasons unknown, the first 1525 edition of *La Cortigiana* remained undiscovered until 1888, where it was found in a single manuscript, MS Magliabechiano Cl. VII, 84, tucked away in the archives of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence, uncovered by a scholar named Alessandro Luzio.⁵⁹ It appears that Luzio did not fully appreciate the singularity of his discovery, which he had come across during archival research undertaken for a biographical study on Aretino that focused primarily on the writer's first years in Venice and on his relationship with the court of Mantua between 1526-31. In a section in which Luzio discusses Aretino's relationship with the Duke of Mantua, Federico Gonzaga,⁶⁰ he makes passing mention of Aretino's composition of an earlier draft of *La Cortigiana*, to which Luzio adds a footnote mentioning the existence of a sole manuscript copy in the Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze.⁶¹ According to Luzio, it is this early edition that Aretino had sent to Federico Gonzaga, who then thanked him for it in a letter dated August 1526: "Io mi vado pigliando spasso in la vostra dotta comedia, vero spechio de la corte moderna

⁵⁹ See Alessandro Luzio, *Pietro Aretino nei suoi primi anni a Venezia e alla corte dei Gonzaga* (Torino: Loescher, 1888), 2; also cited by Innamorati in Aretino, *La Cortigiana*, 8. The manuscript was part of the bequest of Anton Francesco Marmi (1665-1736), who willed that his private library become part of an earlier bequest by Antonio Magliabechi (1716). It remains unclear how Marmi himself came to be in possession of Aretino's text. Innamorati further notes that the manuscript was completed in a hurry, an assessment based on the varying quality of the handwriting, particularly when comparing the first ten pages to those that follow, as well as on the frequent errors in the transcription; he does not offer a clear hypothesis as to a possible motive behind the expedited completion. For ulterior details regarding the manuscript and Innamorati's process of transcription, see his introduction in Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), 23-28.

⁶⁰ Federico II Gonzaga (1500-1540) was the son of Francesco II Gonzaga, marchese of Mantua, and Isabella d'Este. Federico became marchese upon the death of his father in March 1519 and ruled Mantua until his death in 1540. Deanna Shemek provides a concise overview of Federico's personal and political tribulations in her article on Aretino's second comedy, *Il Marescalco*. Aretino's stay in Mantua and complicate relationship with Duke Federico are the subject of a lengthier discussion in Chapter 4. See Deanna Shemek, "Aretino's *Marescalco*: marriage woes and the Duke of Mantua," *Renaissance Studies* 16.3 (2002): 366-380, as well as Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 80-129.

⁶¹ The note begins: "Nel codice magliabecchiano, Cl. VII n. 84, ci è conservata la prima redazione di questa commedia, che dovè essere composta tra il febbraio e il luglio del 1525, dopo cioè la battaglia di Pavia e prima del ferimento dell'Aretino." Luzio proceeds to detail several notable differences between the first edition and the second, rewritten and published in Venice in 1534. Luzio, *Aretino nei suoi primi anni*, 2. In this same brief note, Luzio further asserts that the manuscript should be considered "come autografo, recando correzioni di pugno all'Aretino," though Giuliano Innamorati refutes this entirely.

et di la vita humana presente, la cui lettione non vi potrei dir quanto mi delecta.”⁶² Gonzaga’s praise for *La Cortigiana* as a “true mirror” of court life and its motley cast of characters encapsulates the conventional reading of the play as a reflection of Aretino’s observations during his time in Rome, and indeed sets the tone for subsequent critical considerations that continue even today.

Most notably, a critical edition of the 1525 *Cortigiana* would not appear until eighty-two years after Luzio’s archival discovery, undertaken by Aretino scholar Giuliano Innamorati and published by Einaudi in 1970. Inevitably, these 445 years of relative obscurity have had a significant impact on the critical scholarship of the comedy. Because the 1534 edition was long understood to be only version of the play, it enjoyed several centuries of undivided popular and critical attention; as a result, it is certainly the more familiar of the two editions and generally speaking, is more readily accessible (literally and physically) to modern readers. In 1970, Innamorati situated this lack of attention to the earlier play within the context of a general tendency in the discipline of Renaissance studies to depreciate, devalue, or even disregard the works of Aretino more broadly, although this attitude has changed significantly in the intervening decades, as seen by the number of more recent critical studies cited in this chapter.⁶³ Notably, most critical compilations of Aretino’s works only include the second, revised version of *La Cortigiana*, which

⁶² “I’m having great fun with your smart comedy, true mirror of the modern court and of the human life present there, whose reading delights me more than I can say.” It is possible that Gonzaga’s expression “dotta comedia” also refers to the category of *commedia erudita* to which Aretino’s play would have technically be a part.

⁶³ As Innamorati asserts, “Malgrado le sempre più sicure convalide critiche e nonostante il crescente interesse del pubblico colto, non è solo *La Cortigiana* del ’25 a patire di trascuratezza, ma la maggior parte dell’opera aretiniana, la quale si trova tuttora in condizioni editoriali presso che fatiscenti,” in Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), 9. While it is important to keep in mind that Innamorati offered this critique fifty years ago and thus the critical landscape has changed significantly in the meantime, it remains true that Aretino does not enjoy the same critical attention as some of his more well-known contemporaries, such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Ludovico Ariosto, among others.

Aretino had written and published in Venice in 1534.⁶⁴ While this is ultimately an editorial decision, likely carried out in the understanding of the 1534 *Cortigiana* as representative of Aretino's final intentions for the play (he did rewrite it and oversee its publication), it is a choice that nevertheless echoes the critical history of the work.

Following the publication in 1970 of Innamorati's critical edition of the 1525 *Cortigiana*, there came a flurry of critical attention that sought, in part, to incorporate and make sense of this new textual evidence within Aretino's oeuvre. The first major study was undertaken by renowned Aretino scholar, Paul Larivaille, whose 1972 doctoral thesis, *L'Aretin entre Renaissance et Manierisme*, remains one of the most comprehensive studies of the *poligrafo* and his works to date.⁶⁵ In this study, Larivaille dismisses the first *Cortigiana* out of hand, arguing that the play's apparent 'defects' were evidence of the author's inexperience as a writer and that the play functioned as a mere "step" in Aretino's overall trajectory as a playwright, culminating in the revisions undertaken for the 1534 publication of the second *Cortigiana*.⁶⁶ Larivaille's overall conclusion was thus to devalue the first version of the play in favor of the second revised, printed edition. These assertions came under serious critique in Giulio Ferroni's own study of Aretino's theatre, *Le voci dell'Istrione* (1977), in which he criticized Larivaille's "interpretazione riduttiva"⁶⁷

⁶⁴ The popular critical edition of Aretino's comedies by Mursia Editore, *Tutte le commedie* (first printed in 1968 but most recently reissued in 2009), includes *Il Marescalco*, *La Cortigiana*, *Lo Ipocrito*, *La Talanta*, and *Il Filosofo*. Though it describes itself as an "edizione integrale commentata," this critical edition includes only the second 1534 edition of *La Cortigiana*. Although the introduction mentions that *La Cortigiana* was "scritta nel 1526 [sic] e riscritta a Venezia ove apparve nel 1534," it fails to designate any significance to the earlier edition and does not note the substantial differences between the two plays. Of course, scholars have since taken up this question in depth and at length, but it would nevertheless seem pertinent to acknowledge this important textual history in a purported "edizione integrale commentata." See Pietro Aretino, *Tutte le commedie* (Milano: Mursia, 1968), 14, 115-223.

⁶⁵ Larivaille would later translate this earlier work into Italian: *Pietro Aretino tra Rinascimento e Manierismo*, published by Bulzoni in 1980.

⁶⁶ See Larivaille, *L'Aretin entre Renaissance et Manierisme* (1972), 728-727, 1285-1292.

⁶⁷ See Ferroni, *Le voci dell'istrione*, 44n, 63n.

of the first *Cortigiana*, arguing that the play should be considered on its own merits, rather than as a sort of first draft. In particular, Ferroni suggests a reading of the play as “un tentativo di costruire, sulla materia romana e cortigiana, un nuovo teatro-antiteatro”⁶⁸ which offers the (imagined) audience of Roman courtiers “uno specchio reale della loro condizione Cortigiana, chiaramente alternativo a quella fissazione di modelli aristocratici” common in other contemporary texts.⁶⁹ Notably, Ferroni’s assessment here also recalls the aforementioned judgement of Federico Gonzaga, who too recognized the comedy as “vero specchio de la corte moderna et di la vita humana presente.”

Following Ferroni’s criticisms, Larivaille later recanted his assessment of the first *Cortigiana* as an unrefined and draft-like work. In a 1985 essay, Larivaille echoed Ferroni and others in emphasizing the necessity of considering both editions of the play as works with their own “specificity” and therefore with their own merits, deserving of equal attention and analysis.⁷⁰ Larivaille’s revised reading also aligns with Pamela Stewart’s critique of the categorizations that have often clouded the scholarship on the comedy. Her analysis focuses on the idea of “teatralità” in both editions, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of the concept that shifts from the first version to the second, positing that the two versions of *La Cortigiana* represent “due teatralità diverse”—two different “theatricalities,” or perhaps theatrical sensibilities—which respond to the distinct imperatives of two different places and times; first Rome, and later Venice.⁷¹ According

⁶⁸ Ferroni, *Le voci dell’istrione*, 36.

⁶⁹ Ferroni, *Le voci dell’istrione*, 36. Here Ferroni cites Paolo Cortese’s *De cardinalate* and Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano* as two examples of contemporary works whose reflections offered a more refined picture of the “uomo di corte.”

⁷⁰ See Paul Larivaille, “Théâtre et réalité à Rome en 1525: La première de la ‘Cortigiana’ de l’Aretin,” in AA. VV., *La fête et l’écriture: théâtre de cour, court-théâtre en Espagne et en Italie, 1450-1530* (Aix-en-Provence, 1987), 335-59. Larivaille also revisits his earlier misjudgment of the work in a later study in Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 108.

⁷¹ In her essay, Stewart underscores the different natures of the two plays in order to emphasize their unique contributions to the development of comic drama, concluding: “Ora, se per maggiore teatralità s’intende la

to Stewart, the divergent exigencies of these works manifest in the differences between the 1525 and 1534 editions and prompt us to examine each work in its proper context. Given the comedy's Roman setting, focusing on the 1525 *Cortigiana* allows us to examine the play within its more immediate context, to view the play as a slice of life as Aretino himself experienced it.

As evidenced by these critical discussions, the merits, differences, and meanings of the two versions of the comedy have been discussed at length, although the question has not been revisited for some time. More recent scholarship on Aretino by Raymond Waddington, Susan Gaylard, and Marco Faini, among others, has examined other aspects of his work and literary persona but has not reevaluated the 1525 *Cortigiana* in substantial ways.⁷² This chapter therefore expands on the earlier readings of *La Cortigiana* with the benefit of the insights of these latest studies. My focus here will narrow in more concretely on Ferroni's idea of the "specchio reale" to investigate how the comedy establishes this specular relationship, and how it ultimately transforms it into a call to self-awareness and reformation.

Despite agreement among scholars that the 1525 *Cortigiana* deserves critical examination in its own right, this first edition has nevertheless been judged by some as rushed, unfinished,⁷³

maggiore apertura verso l'integrazione performativa, è lecito asserire la maggiore teatralità della prima redazione. Se, invece, s'intende la maggiore aderenza alle *regole* e alle *consuetudini* del genere comico (e la riduzione del margine d'incertezza performativa), si può parlare di maggiore teatralità della seconda redazione." Stewart, "La diversa 'teatralità' delle due 'Cortigiane'," 733.

⁷² Waddington's most recent work, *Aretino's Saytr* (2004), investigates the author's project self-mythologization, accomplished through Aretino's adoption of different personas, from Pasquino to the satyr. The study does take Aretino's comic works into consideration, but largely focuses on his relationship to the burgeoning print culture as a vehicle for his self-promotion. Gaylard also looks at relationship between Aretino and material culture in the chapter "Banishing the Hollow Man: Print, Clothing, and Aretino's Emblems of Truth," in *Hollow Men: Writing, Objects, and Public Image in Renaissance Italy* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2013), 123-159. She too focuses on the author's attempts to craft a specific writerly persona, though here she limits her inquiry to Aretino's letters in particular. Faini's work on Aretino's early pasquinade poetry will be discussed in greater depth later on in the chapter.

⁷³ Larivaille continues to contend that it is undeterminable if Aretino had actually finished the draft in 1525, or if he returned to it in 1527 to make certain edits that were found in the only extant manuscript copy; see Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 102.

crude, unconventional, and underdeveloped—"elusive," as Richard Andrews put it.⁷⁴ These assessments have generally followed a recognition of the constraints within which the author was working at that time. In a letter dated to 1537, Aretino himself declared to have written the play in only ten days.⁷⁵ While the critical scholarship has acknowledged the work as a key example of the author's experimentalism and tendency towards *anticonformismo*,⁷⁶ scholars remain less convinced about the play's social or political *impegno*, as seen in the assessment of Giulio Ferroni: "nella prima *Cortigiana* l'Aretino non è impegnato in una vera aggressione satirica verso quell singolare mondo della corte di Roma, in cui egli ha ottenuto i suoi primi successi: la commedia appare piuttosto come una scatenata immersione nella turbinosa vita della città-corte."⁷⁷ Ferroni further argues that the comedy does not offer any sort of critical judgement of this world but rather extends only "una accettazione della 'follia' che domina quel mondo."⁷⁸ Here Ferroni's reading of the 1525 *Cortigiana* contrasts significantly with my own, in which I argue instead for an analysis

⁷⁴ Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 73.

⁷⁵ "In sette mattine composi i *Salmi*, in X [10] la *Cortigiana* e il *Marescalco*" [In seven days I composed the *Salmi*, in ten, the *Cortigiana* and the *Marescalco*], from a letter to Messer Francesco Da L'Arme, written from Venice, 15 May 1537; in Pietro Aretino, n. 126, *Lettere*, vol. 1, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1997), 195.

⁷⁶ On this point, Larivaille writes: "[*La Cortigiana*] segna un momento cruciale nella carriera sia umana che di scrittore di Aretino: in quanto primo, estroso bilancio consuntivo di un'esperienza cortigiana destinata poi a sottendere ossessivamente gran parte e del suo comportamento e delle sue opera mature; ma anche come sperimentazione squisitamente letteraria di un genere in corso di sviluppo, nel senso di un anticonformismo più calcolato e meditato di quanto possa apparire a prima vista." Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 102.

⁷⁷ Giulio Ferroni, "Pietro Aretino e le corti," 26-7.

⁷⁸ Ferroni, "Pietro Aretino e le corti," 27. See also Larivaille's comments on the first *Cortigiana*: "Aussi, loin d'être le violent réquisitoire qu'elle deviendra plus tard, la *Cortigiana* de 1525 rest-t-elle avant tout un fielleux mais prudent plaidoyer pro domo, une sorte d'autobiographie modérément polémique doublée d'une tentative plus o moins consciente d'exorciser la faillite imminent de sept années d'effort." [Thus, far from being the violent indictment that it would later become, the *Cortigiana* of 1525 remains above all a bitter but careful 'pro domo' appeal, a kind of moderately polemical autobiography coupled with a more or less conscience attempt to exorcise the impending collapse of seven years of effort; my translation], in Larivaille, *L'Aretin entre Renaissance et Maniérisme* (Lille: Université de Lille, Service de reproduction des theses, 1972), 112, cited in Borsellino, "Memoria teatrale, 227n2).

of the comedy as a theatrical antidote, conceived by the playwright as a cure for the poisonous vice and iniquity of “mondo della corte di Roma.”

As previously mentioned, the existing critical scholarship tends to analyze the comedy by comparing the two editions. In contrast to the original composition, these studies consider the 1534 revision to be the refined expression of Aretino’s earlier life experiences as well as his maturation as a writer and playwright. It is also considered a reflection of Aretino’s new Venetian environment: after the tumult and precarity of his Roman years, Aretino settled in Venice in March of 1527 and would remain there for the following three decades, having discovered a newfound sense of freedom in a republic that was not beholden to any pope or cardinal.⁷⁹ Scholars have suggested that the safety and security provided by the distance of Venice encouraged the playwright to redraft the comedy with an even sharper critique of the Roman court and its denizens, and have therefore read in the 1534 edition an intensified satirical attack on the court of Rome.⁸⁰ Laurie Shepard echoes this argument in her assessment of the revised *Cortigiana*, in which “Aretino’s satire matures beyond vituperation for immediate consumption, and roots itself in a broader and more coherent judgment of men and their actions.”⁸¹ Shepard’s analysis also follows the assumption that the first *Cortigiana* was a mere “sketch” of the comedy, a premise that leads her to focus exclusively on the revised 1534 edition. While this interpretation is comprehensible,

⁷⁹ Waddington discusses at length Aretino’s relationship with Venice in the second chapter, “Aretino and Print Culture,” in his 2004 study. Waddington argues that in Venice, Aretino truly blossomed as a writer due in part to the burgeoning print culture, which the author recognized as an important tool his project of self-promotion. See Waddington, *Aretino’s Saytre*, 33-55.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Ferroni, “Pietro Aretino e le corti,” 30-31; Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 68; as well as Raymond Waddington’s introduction to Campbell and Sbrocchi’s English translation (see: Pietro Aretino, *La Cortigiana*, trans. Campbell and Sbrocchi, 11). Larivaille makes a similar argument in his in-depth analysis of the changes made from the first to second editions. See in particular Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo*, 453n55.

⁸¹ Laurie Shepard, “Petrus Aretinus Acerrimus Virtutum ac Vitiorum Demonstrator,” in *Speaking Truth to Power from Medieval to Modern Italy*, eds. Jo Ann Cavallo and Carlo Lottieri (Annali d’Italianistica 34, 2016), 177.

it fails to recognize the possibility of reading the first edition as a less studied, more immediate reflection of Aretino's response to life at the Roman court. This immediacy is one salient feature that I will explore further in this chapter.

Though the following analyses will focus on the 1525 *Cortigiana*, it is nevertheless worth mentioning the significant aspects of the 1534 revision. Aretino rewrote the play entirely, although the essential plot lines remain unchanged. The satirical orientation of the jokes and allusions is also retained, though Aretino renders them a bit more universal and therefore accessible to a wider audience. Finally, the text itself feels more deliberate in its execution, and scholars have generally noted that the anti-conformism which defined the earlier version gives way to a closer adherence to dramatic conventions.⁸² The revised edition is also considerably longer than the original.⁸³ The sum of these differences has led scholars to describe the 1525 *Cortigiana* as a "performance text," while the more 'polished' 1534 version has been interpreted as a "print text," to be read by its audience rather than seen in the theater.⁸⁴ Indeed, according to Larivaille, the revisions of the 1534 edition reflect "una preoccupazione essenzialmente artistica, un'attenzione costante a migliorare

⁸² Again, it is largely Larivaille's close analysis of the changes that has led scholars to such determinations. Larivaille observes, for example, that "le aggiunte della prima scena [in Act 1 of the 1534 rewrite] (Roma «coda mundi», la bertuccia) e della seconda (battuta sulla vita dei servi) annunciano, senza lasciar prevedere la successive ampiezza, un rinforzo del lato satirico della Cortigiana" (Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo*, 453n55). Ferroni builds on Larivaille's observations to offer another careful reading of the two versions of the comedy, noting that in the 1534 edition, the playwright's increased attention to such established conventions were due not only to an improvement in his own technical abilities as a writer but also to a growing interest in "le strutture" of the theater. See Ferroni, *Le voci dell'istrione*, 103-135.

⁸³ For example, in the Petrocchi critical edition of 1971, which appears to be the only collection of Aretino's works to contain both versions of the comedy, the 1525 *Cortigiana* takes up 100 pages, while the 1534 takes up 124. See Pietro Aretino, *Tutte le opere (Teatro)*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1971). The 1534 version is positioned first in this critical edition, immediately following *Il Marescalco* (a comedy whose composition predated the revised *Cortigiana*), on pages 93-217. The 1525 version is marked as "*Comedia di Pietro Aretino intitolata Cortigiana (prima redazione)*," and comes at the very end of the collected plays, following *La Orazia* (1546), on pages 653-753.

⁸⁴ Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo*, 127. Andrews also makes this argument in *Scripts and Scenarios*, 73-4, as do Campbell and Sbrocchi, in the introduction to their English translation of the play in Aretino, *Cortigiana*, trans. Campbell and Sbrocchi, 11.

l'opera sul piano letterario e teatrale, a correggerne le imperfezioni,”⁸⁵ which ultimately implies a readership rather than a spectatorship for whom the experience of the play would effectually be ephemeral. Pamela Stewart also provides a thorough examination of a number of the differences between the two editions, focusing extensively on the changes associated with the relationship “fra parola e azione,” to argue that in many cases, after the modifications of 1534, “la parola precede l'azione e sembra diminuirne lo spessore, l'intensità”⁸⁶; the *Cortigiana* '25, for example, operates on a number of allusions and suggestions for action on the stage, which *Cortigiana* '34 then renders explicit.⁸⁷

While perhaps challenging for the modern reader, the allusive and impressionistic nature of the 1525 edition captures the chaos of Rome as Aretino knew it. The first *Cortigiana* therefore offers a slice of life and reflects the ephemerality of the moment, giving us a sense of the playwright's own experience at the court of Rome in a way that the revision, undertaken some nine years later, could not offer. In other words, the mimetic quality of the comedy is intrinsically heightened in the first version precisely because its representation of Rome is unmitigated by time and space and was designed to reflect the city as it was in the moment. As Borsellino has suggested, the principal difference between the two versions is thus a distinction “tra rappresentazione attuale e memoria di uno spazio.”⁸⁸ The comedy's sense of *attualità* engages its Roman audience in a more potent way, calling them to recognize their city on stage and see themselves reflected in its

⁸⁵ Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo*, 127.

⁸⁶ Stewart, “La diversa teatralità delle due ‘Cortigiane,’” 720-726, cit. 725.

⁸⁷ Andrews notes that the later *Cortigiana* includes particular elaborations in the dialogue and speeches of the characters, which detail actions that an audience would have been able to see on the stage. To illustrate the point, Andrews offers a very persuasive example from II.2, which exemplifies the addition of this descriptive language: in a dialogue between Messer Maco and Messer Andrea, the 1525 edition has Maco asking, “Così ...?” (“Like this...?”) while the 1534 edition expands the question to “A questo modo, con la veste al viso?” (“Like this, *with a robe over my face?*”). Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 73-4.

⁸⁸ Borsellino, “Memoria teatrale”: 228.

chaos. The later revision ultimately eliminates many of these specific and topical elements, rendering the comedy more universal but perhaps distancing the text from its context in a way that no longer prompts its spectators to that spark of recognition.

Aretino's direct address to the audience in the 1525 prologue provides us with an entry point to the deeper analyses that will follow in this chapter and illustrates this call to recognition aimed at the spectators. This address is also particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that the playwright eliminates it completely in the 1534 redaction, having rewritten the prologue in its entirety. The playwright begins by praising his elite spectators, concealing in this laudatory discourse the key to interpreting the entire comedy:

Vostre Signorie mi son patrone, e ancora ch'io abbia bravato un poco, non c'è periculo niuno, e mi burlo con voi che sète nobilissimi, costumati e virtuosi. E non credete che questa ciancia che vi sarà racconta vi facessi dispiacere, perché ella è nata a contemplazione vostra.⁸⁹

A number of elements in this address invite discussion. First, the designation "Vostre Signorie," coupled with Aretino's subsequent declaration that the audience also serves as his "patrons," offers what may perhaps be the clearest indication of this imagined audience. Aretino casts these spectators as his superiors in the hierarchy of the court environment, among whom were likely to be a number of the writer's patrons, both current and prospective. Aretino also alludes to the subject matter of the comedy and advises the spectators not to be offended if they find themselves the butt of the joke ("mi burlo con voi"), coupling the forewarning with overt flattery ("che sete nobilissimi, costumati e virtuosi"). This juxtaposition recalls the style of his earlier anti-clerical

⁸⁹ "My lords, you are my patrons and, even if I've been a little arrogant, there's no danger in it, and I make fun of you a bit, since you're all noble, decent, and virtuous. And don't think that this that bit of gossip we're about to show you will displease you, because it was written with you in mind." *Cortigiana* (1525), prologue.

pasquinades, which featured exaggerated and sarcastic praise alongside sharp critiques.⁹⁰ Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, Aretino affirms the inspiration behind the play's composition: the very spectators themselves. Here the playwright enacts a bit of clever phrasing to reveal a dual message: in one sense, he declares that the comedy was composed with a chosen audience in mind—"è nata nella contemplazione vostra"—yet taken another way, he seems to suggest that the comedy's episodes were inspired by their transgressions and deceitful antics at court. The double-speak seen in this passage is characteristic of the rest of the prologue, and indeed of the entire play itself, and sets the stage for a comedy filled with dueling messages, double-handed tricks, and a dual plot that will offer a look at two sides of the same coin.

From these considerations, the 1525 *Cortigiana* emerges as an attempt to engage the audience by speaking directly to them and compelling them to see themselves on stage. This specular relationship then becomes an act of instigation to stir the audience from their idleness—to "ragunare tanta turba di sfaccendati," as Aretino puts it in the prologue.⁹¹ Aretino effectually mocks his Roman spectators to their faces, and as they slowly come to recognize themselves in the characters' tricks and troubles, such mockery fulfills the satirical function of the comedy as both an admonition and a corrective. When the audience sees the staging of gullibility, subordination, and blinding ambition—"born with them in mind," as Aretino explains—they will be called to reformation. This deployment of theater demonstrates the overarching argument of

⁹⁰ On the theme of praise and blame in Renaissance oratory, see John O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450-1521*, Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies 3 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979).

⁹¹ Meaning to "gather such a crowd of idlers"; see *Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. Nino Borsellino has too acknowledged the provocative function of the first *Cortigiana*, arguing that the clear aggression of its prologue must have taken aim at a more immediate target: the spectators themselves; see Borsellino, "Memoria teatrale," 230.

this dissertation, which proposes an understanding of these early works of theatrical comedy as a vehicle for social remedy and catalyst for civic and social change.

The 1525 Cortigiana as an Antidote to Vice and Catalyst for Change

These early years in Rome form the backdrop of Aretino's first comedy as the author employs, and perhaps exploits, a host of familiar people, places, and shared histories that propel the *Cortigiana* plot. Aretino's efforts to closely associate the play both in time and space are further reinforced by his reliance on the figure of Pasquino, who Aretino positions as the play's true author from its very onset: "gli è nato di poeta però qui lo faccio autore."⁹² By declaring Pasquino the creative force behind the comedy, Aretino positions his play as a popular work—written for the people, expressing common sentiments and shared discontent through the *portavoce* of Pasquino. This line is followed by a lengthy description of Pasquino's mythologized genealogy, born to Apollo and an unknown muse or poet; "bastardo è egli," as Aretino declares. The reversal of the traditional 'illegitimate son' narrative is also noteworthy: typically, one was considered "illegitimate" when the biological father was unknown (the mother, having given birth to the child, was generally easier to determine). In Aretino's rendering of Pasquino's parentage, the father-god Apollo is the known quantity, while the mother is unspecified. This is especially significant vis-à-vis Aretino's own muddled lineage, which he went to great lengths to obscure;⁹³ Aretino too was considered a "bastard," and by claiming a similar origin story for Pasquino, the playwright reclaims his own history and appears to deify himself in the process.

⁹² Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. ("He was born a poet, but here I've made him the author.")

⁹³ The circumstances of Aretino's birth are discussed briefly in note 2; Larivaille compares the historical record with Aretino's own efforts to manipulate the narrative of his family origins in *Pietro Aretino*, 11-24.

It is further telling that beyond this introduction of Pasquino in the 1525 prologue, Aretino invokes the notorious figure another four times throughout the subsequent five acts. The first of these mentions occurs early on in the play (I.24) and is worth considering in further detail as evidence of Aretino's own desire to establish Pasquino's role in the comedy not only as a fierce satirical voice but as a guide for aspiring courtiers. In this scene, Messer Maco, desperate to climb the social hierarchy upon arriving in Rome from Siena, attends the first of his "courtier" lessons with Maestro Andrea, who has devised the training sessions as a scheme intended to prey on Maco's desperation and naiveté.⁹⁴ As Andrea explains the finer points of Rome's contradictions to the newcomer, Andrea reassures Maco that he will get his chance to "practice" his new skills with Pasquino:

M. ANDREA:	E come sapete queste cose, pigliarete pratica con Magistro Pasquino. Ma vi sarà gran fatica a imparare la natura di Maestro Pasquino, il qual ha una lingua che taglia.
MESS. MACO:	Che arte fa egli, questo Maestro Pasquino?
M. ANDREA:	Poeta di porco in la ribecca. ⁹⁵

Though Pasquino was alive and well in the contemporary popular imagination, these lines between Andrea and Maco explicitly demonstrate how Aretino intended to define Pasquino's *modus operandi* for his Roman audience. Pasquino exists not only to criticize and condemn Roman vice,

⁹⁴ The trope of the stupid, naïve, and vain Sanese is part of a long tradition in Italian literature and certainly pre-dates Aretino. Notable examples include Dante, *Inferno* XXIX: "E io dissi al poeta: «Or fu già mai / gente sì vana come la sanese? / Certo non la francesca sì d'assai!»" (vv. 121-123); and several occurrences in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, beginning with Day VII, tale 3, recurring in all the instances in which the stereotypical Sanese archetype comes into play. Aretino also makes use of Maco's vanity in order to emphasize his gullibility, which become intertwined in the plot of the comedy.

⁹⁵ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), I.24. ("And as you come to know these things, you'll be able to practice with Master Pasquino. But it'll be very difficult for you to learn the true nature of Master Pasquino, who's got a tongue that cuts. / What is his art, this Master Pasquino? / A poet of filthy verses played on his rebec.") Campbell and Sbrocchi define the rebec as "a medieval instrument with three strings, played with a bow, favored by troubadours"; see Aretino, *Cortigiana*, trans. Campbell and Sbrocchi, 149n62.

but also to instruct and guide new courtiers on the ways of the court, who can turn to him for “practice.” As Andrea explains, Pasquino is also fierce, with a “lingua che taglia.” The implications, of course, are that Pasquino’s talents are actually Aretino’s, an idea already supported by the playwright’s earlier efforts in establishing himself as the voice of Pasquino through his popular pasquinades. Aretino’s use of the verb *tagliare* here is noteworthy as well; though in Italian, the term literally means “to cut,” implying the sharpness of Pasquino’s barbs, it comes from the Late Latin *talio*, a noun which also signifies a punishment “similar and equal to the injury sustained.”⁹⁶ The notion of retaliation implied here echoes the Dantean *contrapasso* yet again, which the poet had employed to administer justice to the sinners of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. Importantly, in the *Commedia* the *contrapasso* can have either a retributive or a redemptive function; in Hell, it informs the punishments, while in Purgatory, it provides the key to earning salvation. In this scene, Andrea’s description of Pasquino’s role embodies both characteristics: with his biting tongue, he punishes those who earned his ire while training others in the art of *dir male* so that they too may call out corruption and vice when they encounter it.

Andrea completes the picture of Pasquino with a final depiction of him as a poet who plays filthy songs on his *ribecca*, a medieval string instrument often used by troubadours to accompany their ballads.⁹⁷ The description evokes competing notions of high and low art—a specialty of Aretino himself, who began his career as a court poet before making a name for himself as chief lampooner among the pasquinade poets. Borsellino also offers a suggestive interpretation of “poeta

⁹⁶ “Talio,” in Charton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *a Latin Dictionary*. Online.

⁹⁷ Campbell and Sbrocchi define the rebec as “a medieval instrument with three strings, played with a bow, favored by troubadors” (in Aretino, *Cortigiana*, trans. Campbell and Sbrocchi, 149n62); Innamorati also offers a reading of the *ribeca* as a type of musical instrument, while admitting particular difficulty in comprehending the exact meaning of “poeta di porco,” in Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), 143n101.

di porco in la ribeca:” it taken to mean “poeta di straordinaria intelligenza”⁹⁸ – one who exhibits cognitive speed, or is *swift on the uptake*—then Aretino would define himself as ingenious poet, whose sharp words both cut and retaliate. Notably, Aretino revises this depiction in the 1534 redaction, describing Pasquino as one who “lavora al torno di poesia” (one who works in poetry), effectively neutralizing the portrayal.⁹⁹

The objective of the comedy to both critique and instruct, to provoke change through satire, are further revealed in a close reading of the unusual 1525 prologue. To reiterate, scholarship on *La Cortigiana* has often argued that the 1534 Venetian edition of the comedy demonstrates a more overt, and more temporal and vicious attack on the Roman court, facilitated by his geographical distance. However, this position is worth reconsidering when we take into account Aretino’s purpose in turning to the theater as the optimal medium through which he might critique the court. Having earned a name for himself as the *portavoce* of Roman discontent, the theater represented a plausible next step for Aretino as a means to voice his critiques through satire. As scholars such as Cottino-Jones have noted, Rome was historically a city of spectacle, of pomp and circumstance, and in the first decades of the sixteenth century, the popularity of theater grew in prominence among many of the city’s humanist elites.¹⁰⁰ Aretino was quick to capitalize on this growing trend, equally interested in the theater as a space of direct contact with his public, where he might deliver his satire unmediated by outside forces. The theater also provided an opportunity for the author to develop the power of *opsis* as an impactful means through which to express his critiques. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle appears to relegate this element, often translated into English as “spectacle,” to

⁹⁸ “Azzardo l’ipotesi che « ribecca » anziché essere omologata su « ribeca », potrebbe fungere da spia gergale. Cfr. il verbo « rebeccare », « ribeccare », nel senso di capire, cogliere a volo, registrato dai dizionari del furbesco [...] « Poeta di porco in la ribeca » potrebbe valere: poeta di straordinaria intelligenza,” Borsellino, “Memoria teatrale,” 238n16.

⁹⁹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1534), I.22.

¹⁰⁰ See especially Cottino-Jones, “Rome and the Theater in the Renaissance,” 237-245.

the lowest tier of importance, for tragedy may produce its effect even when read (tragedy, not comedy, being the focus of Aristotle's text).¹⁰¹ Yet for Aretino, the ability to speak directly to his audience—a possibility that he takes full advantage of in the 1525 prologue—becomes one of the most significant aspects of his theater.

It is this sense of immediacy that likely attracted Aretino to drama, fostering an impression of proximity and timeliness with which he had previously experimented in his pasquinades and even in the *sonetti lussuriosi*. These elements are further developed in the 1525 *Cortigiana*, and especially in its extraordinary prologue, in which Aretino's recourse to the discourses of purgation and renewal provides a key to reading the entire message of the comedy. The typical prologue of Renaissance comedy was intended to perform a simple function in the unfolding of the play. It established the position of the audience vis-à-vis the characters on stage and clarified exactly what was about to occur (through the customary plot summary) and how to understand it, preparing the audience for an interpretation of play's actions as determined by the playwright himself.¹⁰²

Aretino's prologues, including that of the 1525 *Cortigiana*, generally follow this precedent. Yet the 1525 prologue is also somewhat of an outlier among other examples in Cinquecento comedy, and even among Aretino's other plays. In addition to its notable length, it is unusual in that it features two interlocutors, the *Istrione del Prologo* and the *Istrione dell'Argomento*, anthropomorphized characters who embody the two primary 'features' of the prologue (that is, the "prologo" and the "argomento" from which they get their names). Their designation as *istrioni* is also quite interesting. The term is historically synonymous with *commediante*, or one who recites a part in a comedy, with linguistic ties to ancient Roman comedy (from the Latin *histrionem*,

¹⁰¹ Aristotle, *Poetics* 6.

¹⁰² On this point, see Maggie Günsberg, *Gender and the Italian Stage: From the Renaissance to the Present Day* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 43-44.

meaning ‘actor’ or ‘player,’).¹⁰³ Giulio Ferroni has also explored the figure of the *istrione* in Aretino’s comedies at length; the title of his 1977 monograph, *Le voci dell’istrione*, is duly evocative, suggesting Aretino’s own role as an *istrione* who embodies several voices across all of his works. It is noteworthy then that in his 1525 prologue, Aretino presents not one, but two bickering *istrioni*, who take turns presenting the *prologo* and *argomento* of the forthcoming comedy. The duality at play here is characteristic of Aretino’s works in general, evident in the double plot of *La Cortigiana* and in the author’s penchant for double entendres, for example, and echoed in his carefully crafted persona—that of the *acerrimus virtutum ac vitiorum demonstrator*, someone who points out both virtue *and* vice.

The two *istrioni* of Aretino’s prologue exemplify the sharp comic tone that pervades throughout the comedy, even though the two figures disappear once the action of the play begins. While on stage, they antagonize each other through a series of jokes and witticisms, replete with allusions to current Roman affairs, before turning their attention more fully to the audience to perform their respective parts, each indicated by a *rubrica* in Innamorati’s 1970 critical edition. First comes the designated “Prologo” presented by the *Istrione del Prologo*, which takes the form of a lengthy diatribe aimed at the audience, whom *Prologo* calls a bunch of “sfaccendati” (do-nothings) who have gathered to divert themselves with the new spectacle. In this prologue-within-a-prologue, the *Istrione* only hints at the play’s subject matter, focusing more exclusively on the details of its Roman backdrop and the role of Pasquino in guiding the comedy’s composition. The “Prologo” also offers an allusion on the comedy’s didactic function, ‘as if the comedy had nothing better to do than to make the audience laugh’: “Sarà qualche satrapo che dirà essere venuto per

¹⁰³ It is possible that the Latin term originates from ancient Histira, a Greek-cum-Roman colony located in present day Constanta, in Romania; according to legend, the Roman poet Ovid—another figure quite familiar with transformations and remedies—was exiled here.

avere qualche piacere de la comedia, come se la comedia non avesse altra faccenda che farlo ridere...”¹⁰⁴ Here, the comedy’s characteristic duality emerges as well. Beyond the recreational aim of the comedy—theater is supposed to entertain, after all—the *Istrione del Prologo* insinuates that there is indeed a secondary purpose, though notably, he fails to specify what it might entail. He merely continues, changes the subject even (“Ma voi non volete star quieti; orsú, ch’io vi chiarisco ch’io vi vitupererò tutti, per Dio!”¹⁰⁵), without further explanation. These lines thus serve as an invitation to the spectators to search the play for ulterior meaning, setting them up for a lesson that they will only discover along the way.

I argue that what the comedy intends to achieve in the unfolding of the plot is revealed to us through the language of catharsis established in the prologue, to which we shall now turn our attention more fully. In the 1525 prologue, Aretino pursues the motif of remedy in an extraordinary, virtuosic rhetorical sequence in which the playwright claims the power to “restore” the spectators in his invocation of various evacuants and laxatives. This compelling aspect of the text has largely eluded critical attention. While some scholars have remarked on the language in passing (suggesting that such connotative wordplay functions merely as a part of Aretino’s overall reliance on farcical, “realistic” language to advance his comedy), there has been little effort to understand how the prologue’s allusions to purgation and renewal might play a part in the comedy’s larger intellectual and moral project.¹⁰⁶ They are not merely raunchy wisecracks, but rather establish a foundation for the entire play, foregrounded as they are at the comedy’s very

¹⁰⁴ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. (“There’ll be some big shot who’ll say that he’s come here to just to enjoy the comedy, as if the comedy had nothing else to do but make him laugh...”)

¹⁰⁵ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. (“But you don’t want to keep quiet; come on now, you’ll see that I’ll denounce you all, for the love of God!”)

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Borsellino, who argues that the medical terminology present in the 1525 prologue (specifically “serviziale” and “cristero”) functions as “sfruttamento burlesco ormai corrente della terminologia medica ippocratea,” to suggest that Aretino’s use of such language was merely in line with the contemporary comic trend (Borsellino, “Memoria teatrale,” 229).

onset. Again, the Renaissance prologue serves as a formal structure specifically designed to reveal not only the play's organization and plot, but also a sense of the comedy's relationship with its public and with Rome itself as theatrical backdrop. Such stark and unexpected language, even when couched among double-entendres, throws the entire prologue into sharp relief and calls particular attention to the medical metaphors at work. This emphasis on purgation links Aretino's comedy to the theatrical ritual of *katharsis*, thus signaling the restorative change that the spectators will undergo through the act of their collective witnessing and eventual (self-) recognition. In this way, Aretino positions theater—and more importantly, the combination of *opsis*, *agnanorisis*, and *katharsis* that it establishes—as a corrective remedy to the moral decay of the Roman court.

The trope of purgation appears in the witty repartee between the two *Istrioni* as well in their respective speeches, beginning with the very first lines of the play. To open the comedy, the *Istrione del Prologo* begins by suggesting to the audience that if they are wise, they'll just applaud now and go home ("Ma se voi siate savi: Plaudite et valetel!"), which can be read as a bit of foreshadowing, indicating to the spectators that they might not like what they are about to see. Ferroni has also suggested that these very first lines of the comedy introduce an act of *rovesciamento*, evidenced in Aretino's reconfiguration of the expression "Valete et plaudite," a turn of phrase common in classical Roman theatre which generally arrived at the *end* of a play to signal its conclusion, rather than at its beginning.¹⁰⁷ Following the *Istrione del Prologo*'s recommendation, the *Istrione dell'Argomento* begins to complain that such a response would waste the efforts he expended in composing the *argomento* in the first place. The idea of 'waste' here leads to the introduction of the wordplay involving purgatives and provides the key to interpreting

¹⁰⁷ The expression was common to the comedies of Terrence in particular, though it can be found at the conclusion of Plautus's *Menaechmi*. See Ferroni, *Le voci dell'istrione*, 43.

the recurrent use of these same words throughout the remainder of the prologue: “Come ‘Plaudite et valetè’? Donque io ho durato tanta fatica a comporre questo argomento, serviziale, cristioro o quel che diavol si chiami, et ora vuoi ch’io lo getti via?”¹⁰⁸

The joke here turns on the dual meaning of the word *argomento*.¹⁰⁹ In the context of a standard comedy prologue, the term would have typically denoted the subject matter of the play at hand, but in this instance of provocative double entendre in *La Cortigiana*, *argomento* also functions as a synonym for a particular medicine similar to that of an enema, a purgative substance inserted rectally.¹¹⁰ To underscore this secondary meaning, the *Istrione dell’Argomento* follows the term with a pair of synonyms, *serviziale* and *cristioro*; both words indicate a potion or concoction of sorts, a “cocitura d’erbe, con altri ingredienti, che si mette in corpo per la parte posteriore,” used to provoke the purgation of one’s intestines.¹¹¹ Taken together, the three terms work as a synonymic series that links the more literal denotation of *argomento* (as ‘subject matter’) to its second meaning related to purgatives and the act of purgation.

While some scholars such as Innamorati have made passing note of the presence of this terminology in the comedy’s opening lines, this imagery has not yet sustained deeper critical

¹⁰⁸ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. (“What do you mean, ‘Applaud and go home’? After all my efforts endured in composing this *argomento*, *serviziale*, *cristioro*, or whatever the hell it’s called, and now you want me to throw it out?”) Translating this line into English proves particularly challenging, thanks to the centrality of the word play in the original Italian.

¹⁰⁹ Aretino uses the terms *argomento* and *argomento* interchangeably, and there no semantic or etymological difference between the two. Such orthographic discrepancies were common in this period.

¹¹⁰ See Innamorato’s note on the term in Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), 135n5. The Accademia della Crusca defines “serviziale” simply as “argomento,” and includes the Latin etymology “clyster, clysterium,” itself coming from the Ancient Greek *κλύστήρ* (*klustēr*), indicating the syringe-like instrument used to inject the medical substance into the body. The Crusca’s definitions are rather self-referential; see the Crusca’s entry for “serviziale”: <http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=SERVIZIALE>

¹¹¹ “A concoction of herbs, with other ingredients, that one puts in one’s body via the rear.” The term *cristioro* is also seen as *cristeo* or *clistere* in more common usage. See the Crusca’s entry for “cristeo”: http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=CRISTEO_ed1

consideration.¹¹² Given that this specific language recurs several more times in the prologue, I argue that Aretino, in framing the content of his play—the *argomento*—as literally synonymous with a laxative, posits his play as an antidote or remedy which will purge the spectators of the Roman court of their vice and folly through the process of comic catharsis.¹¹³ Moreover, Aretino’s choice of verb here is quite suggestive. When used in a writerly context, the Italian *comporre* denotes the act of literary composition (meaning literally ‘to compose’). More generally, however, the verb simply means “to put and mix together various things to make them into one” (“porre e mescolare insieme varie cose per farne una”).¹¹⁴ In this way, the wordplay that launches the prologue—which in turn inaugurates the entire comedy itself—illuminates the play’s objective to treat the metaphorical sick body of the Roman court.

Moreover, it is significant that these terms—*argomento*, *serviziale*, and *cristioro* (along with its variants of *cristero* and *clistere*)—recur in several distinct moments throughout the prologue, and always in conjunction with one another. Another illustrative example can be seen following the presentation of the ‘Prologo’ by the *Istrione del Prologo*. Upon conclusion of his lengthy speech, the *Istrione dell’Argomento* interrupts him to chide him for his ramblings, and in his reproach, the evocative grouping of terms (*serviziale*, *argomento*, and *cristero*) appears yet again:

ISTR. ARG.	Tu non dovevi finire mai più, acciò ch’io avessi a stare con questa <i>calza</i> tutt’oggi in
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¹¹² Innamorati simply notes that “la seria sinonimica corrisponde a quella precedente usata dall’Istrione del Prologo («proemio, diceria, ecc.»),” in Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), 135n5. See also Borsellino, “Memoria teatrale,” 229.

¹¹³ Chapter 2 of this dissertation discusses the notion of “comic catharsis” at length. This analysis was greatly benefitted also by the work of Dana F. Sutton and particularly, his book *The Catharsis of Comedy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), which argues that comedy achieves its own catharsis of pity, fear, and similar emotions, but through pleasure and laughter. Although tragedy (which is the basis of Aristotle’s theory in the *Poetics*) and comedy employ different means, the objective is the same: the purgation of negative emotions in the spectator.

¹¹⁴ See the Crusca’s entry for “comporre”: <http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=comporre>

mano, e che 'l *serviziale* si freddassi e che costoro non ricevessino la metà de l'*argomento*.

ISTR. PROL. Tu hai ragione; tamen io voglio sapere, quanto ad un certum quid, che erbe sono in cotesto *cristero*...

ISTR. ARG. Io li ho messo la *merda*, sta' queto, e vedi farmi cotale *argomento*, e poi mi parla.¹¹⁵ (my emphases)

If Aretino allowed some ambiguity in meaning in the first deployment of these words, the suggestion of an emetic-provoked purgation now becomes explicit in the repeated occurrence of these three terms. The act of purging is further underscored by the *Istrione dell'Argomento*'s declaration that he put actual 'shit' (*merda*) in his *cristero* concoction. Taken literally, the assertion does not make much sense (why put excrement in an enema?), but taken in context with the other pharmacological terms, the notion of putting *merda* in the plot summary-turned-laxative is revealing. If the comedy's underlying aim is to 'purge' the spectators of their negative emotions and inclinations through the process of catharsis, then its *argomento* is both plot and purgative. Thus the *merda* becomes a stand-in for the vice, venality, hypocrisy, and general corruption of the Roman court that will be satirized on stage *and* that which will be purged from the audience by the play's conclusion.

To further illustrate this idea, the term *calza* also provides a clue in interpreting the prologue's scatological terminology. The word is first spoken by the *Istrione dell'Argomento* just before the *Istrione del Prologo* launches into his speechified 'Prologo.' Having grown tired of

¹¹⁵ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. ("ISTR. ARG. You were never going to finish, so I'd have been here with this *calza* in my hand all day, so that the *serviziale* would get cold, and these people would only get half the plot-laxative [*argomento*]. / ISTR. PROL. You're right. But could you give me some inkling of what herbs are in in this plot summary-laxative [*cristero*]. / ISTR. ARG. I put shit in there! Now be quiet and see that I've done this plot-laxative [*argomento*—then talk to me.") Here as above, the wordplay in the original Italian is challenging to render in English, and much of the intended ambiguity is lost.

their banter, *Argomento* goads *Prologo* to get on with his part so that the comedy might finally begin and commands: “Recita quisto beato prologo e io farò l’argomento a quisti òmini da bene, e poi chi ha a fare la comedia la faccia, ch’io per me non son per fare altro che l’officio mio; e ecco la calza.”¹¹⁶ Still playing with the double sense of *argomento* here, the *Istrione dell’Argomento* shows the spectators (emphasized with the demonstrative *ecco!*) the instrument intended to administer the purgative solution, known as the *calza*.¹¹⁷ The joke then turns on the double meaning of this word: while in common speech, it denotes a standard type of sock or stocking, here Aretino is deploying the term’s secondary, more technical meaning as a delivery device for the pharmakon in question. Importantly, in this declaration the *Istrione dell’Argomento* not only specifies what he is going to do (“fare l’argomento”), but *who* he is going to do it to (“a quisti òmini da bene); that is, the “gentlemen” spectators of the Roman court. When the *Istrione dell’Argomento* presents the *calza* to the audience, he is thus enacting the very function his own name proclaims: he is the *Istrione* of the purgatives, arrived to administer the remedy to the audience with his specialized equipment.

In the prologue, Aretino also uses the term *calza* as a synonym for the comedy itself, which underscores the idea that the play is intended to serve as an antidote presented to the spectators for their consumption.¹¹⁸ After the *Istrione del Prologo* recites his assigned part, he prompts the

¹¹⁶ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. (“Recite this blessed prologue and I’ll do the plot summary for these gentlemen (alternatively, ‘and I’ll do the laxative for these gentlemen’), and then who has business with the comedy will get on with it, for I’m not here for anything else but to do my own duties. Ah, here’s the ‘calza’!”)

¹¹⁷ Innamorati notes this meaning of *calzo* in his critical edition, which is confirmed by the Accademia della Crusca. Among the more common denotations, the Crusca offers an ulterior definition of the term as “una sorte di strumento, col quale si fanno i serviziali” [a type of instrument with which laxatives (*serviziali*) are administered]. See Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), 136n19, as well as the Crusca’s entry for “calza”: http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=CALZA_ed1

¹¹⁸ This association between *calza* and comedy likewise recalls the well-known symbol of ancient Greek theatre, the dual masks representing Tragedy and Comedy, also known as the “sock and buskin.” The sock, or *soccus* in Latin (*socco*, in Italian), signified a type of loose-fitting shoe typically worn by comedic actors,

Istrione dell'Argomento to take his turn to present the 'Argomento,' the standard plot summary required of Renaissance prologues. Notably, however, the *Istrione dell'Argomento* commences the summary with a specific claim about the play's restorative effects, where—rather than beginning with the stock expression “in this comedy”—he cheekily substitutes *commedia* with *calza*:

In questa *calza* vi porto un *argomento* molto ristorativo e in questa sua *composizione*, ch'è buona a fare ridere il pianto, c'è Messer Maco di Coe da Siena, studente in libris, venuto a Roma per acconciarsi per cardinale con qualche papa.¹¹⁹ (my emphases)

In this first line of the *Istrione dell'Argomento*'s speech, the association between *calza* and *argomento* reappears, followed by the ambiguous term *composizione*. Each word holds a double meaning which, when read in concert with one another, alludes to the corrective medicine that the comedy purports to offer its spectators. By replacing *commedia* with *calza*, Aretino suggests that the play has a purifying effect, purging the spectators through the “argomento molto ristorativo” (“very restorative laxative–plot summary”) presented to them on stage.

The deployment of the adjective *ristorativo* is thus especially noteworthy in considering the comedy as a figurative antidote to the vice and venality of the Roman court. The definition of the word is fairly straightforward, meaning that which “ha virtù, e forza di ristorare, e di confortare” (has virtue and the ability to restore and to comfort),¹²⁰ from the Latin *restauro*,

thereby symbolizing the genre of comedy; in Italian, the expression *calzare il sacco* means to write, or to recite, comedies. The buskin, or *cothurnus* in Latin (*coturno* in Italian), referred to a specific sandal generally worn by tragic actors, thereby symbolizing the genre of tragedy. Coincidentally, Aretino's later comedy *Talanta* would be performed in Venice in 1542 by the amateur *Compagnia della calza* (Company of the Sock)—an allusion to the sock and buskin of ancient theater. See Ronald Martinez, “Spectacle,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 252. See also the definition provided by the Istituto dei Treccani on “socco”:

<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/socco/>

¹¹⁹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. (“In this *calza*, I bring you all an *argomento* that will be very restorative, and in its very composition, which is so good that it'll make tears laugh, there is Messer Maco di Coe da Siena, student *in libris* [of books], come to Rome in order to dress himself as cardinal for some pope.”)

¹²⁰ See the Crusca's entry for “ristorativo”:

meaning to restore, repair, or rebuild. When applied to the term *argomento*, however, *ristorativo* takes on new meaning, as Aretino again plays with the dual meaning of *argomento* as both plot and purgative. In these lines, the *Istrione dell'Argomento* is suggesting that the comedy contains a restorative plot, which transforms the play itself into a remedy that aims first at purging and then rejuvenating its spectators. The *Istrione del Prologo*'s final line of dialogue, directed at the *Istrione dell'Argomento* before the prologue finally concludes and Act I begins, further underscores this meaning: "per mia fe' che sei un buon maestro da fare argomenti et è stato molto solutivo"¹²¹ As before, the word *argomento* is associated with an adjective (*solutivo*) that links it to the physical body. Most significantly, the word *solutivo* describes the effects of a medicine that purges the stomach and intestines, and containing no apparent dual meaning, functions as the prologue's most explicit reference to purgation.¹²² In portraying the plot as both *ristorativo* and *solutivo*, Aretino presents his play as an antidote for its spectators, a medicine that will work to both purge and renew, enacting the curative process of catharsis.

Lastly, the *Istrione dell'Argomento*'s plot summary offers a final indication that signals to the audience which aspect of the comedy's narrative will be most salient to the process of this rejuvenation. A close look at *Argomento*'s speech reveals that it is not the entire comedy that will be "molto ristorativo," but rather one of its dual plot lines in particular: the story of Messer Maco di Coe da Siena, "studiante in libris," who has come to Rome in order to 'dress himself up' (*acconciarsi*) as a cardinal in service of "qualche papa." While the storyline that features the hapless Neapolitan Parabolano and his entourage begins on stage already in the first act (I.9), the

http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=RISTORATIVO_ed1

¹²¹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. ("My God, you're a master at doing plot summaries / making laxatives (*argomenti*); it was very solutive.")

¹²² According to the Crusca, "Add. Che solve; ed è per lo più aggiunto di Medicamento, che placidamente purghi il ventre; e talora si usa in forza di sust. Lat. *solutivus*"; see the Crusca's entry for "solutivo": <http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=SOLUTIVO>

Istrione dell'Argomento dedicates the first three hundred or so words of his summary to the story of Maco, presented as one with the very opening line: “In questa calza un argomento molto ristorativo e in questa sua composizione [...] c'è Messer Maco da Siena...” This syntax indicates that the plot line which features Maco's quest to integrate himself at the Roman court will be of particular relevance in understanding the use of comedy as a remedy and how Aretino brilliantly deployed the genre in service of satirizing the Roman court.

Unusual as it may be, this nervy and clever prologue thus establishes the comedy's satirical tone as well as its direct connection to the process of catharsis. As implied by the reiterated allusions to the means and process of purgation, the playwright endeavors to subject his audience to “un argomento molto ristorativo,” that is, to an evacuant-like plot that aims to induce not only purgation but first and foremost, that moment of recognition, or *anagnorisis*, defined by Aristotle as a transformation from ignorance to knowledge. Following this new state of awareness, however, a second change must then take place: an act of *peripeteia*, or reversal—that is, a change of circumstances or turning point in the play.¹²³ Prompting the spectators to recognize themselves in the foolish, venial, and indeed naïve character of Messer Maco, this dramatic process aims to prompt a change *off-stage*, as the audience becomes self-aware and penitent.

This strategy finds support in another sixteenth-century text, the *De poeta libri sex* (Venice, 1559) by Antonio Sebastiano Minturno (1500-1574). Though the work deals with tragedy, Minturno's theory of catharsis bears a striking similarity to Aretino's metaphorical purging detailed in the 1525 prologue. In the *De Poeta*, the author suggests that the principles of homeopathic medicine, which support the theory that the elimination of a disease can be achieved by introducing to the body a “therapeutic agent” similar to the disease itself, might be equally

¹²³ Again, see Aristotle, *Poetics* 10-14.

applied to diseases of the mind.¹²⁴ In other words, Minturno appears to argue for a sort of vaccination of the body and of the mind, a theory which he later refined in his 1564 *Arte Poetica*. In the *Poetica*, Minturno writes: “As a physician eradicates, by means of poisonous medicine, the perfervid poison of disease which affects the body, so tragedy purges the mind of its impetuous perturbations by the force of these emotions beautifully expressed in verse.”¹²⁵ With the 1525 *Cortigiana*, Aretino introduces a similar notion, aiming to expose his spectators to a theatrical performance of the dissoluteness that plagued the Roman court. Through such exposure, the spectators would recognize themselves on stage, and in “seeing in another so great a change of fortune,” as Minturno writes¹²⁶ (or rather, in witnessing in their on-stage counterparts such foolishness, avarice, and naiveté), they might ultimately be purged of their own wicked and immoral passions.

Renowned Spanish scholar Pedro Laín-Entralgo has also offered an analysis of catharsis not only as a process of purification, but more importantly, as a moment of clarification:

Thanks to this process of *anagnorisis* that the spectator knows and recognizes what really is occurring on stage and therefore is his own possible fate [...] Only by virtue of recognition do the truth, the inner coherence, and the meaning of the plot [...] become evident in the mind of the spectator. The *Poetics* calls this ‘resolution’ of the affective state of the spectator *katharsis*.¹²⁷

It is precisely this act of recognition that Aretino foregrounds, and indeed foreshadows, in the prologue of the first *Cortigiana*, evident especially in the moments when the two *Istrione* speak

¹²⁴ Leo Golden, “The Purgation Theory of Catharsis,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31.4 (1973): 473.

¹²⁵ Antonio Sebastian Minturno, *L’Arte poetica* (Venice, 1564), in *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, ed. Allan H. Gilbert (New York: American Book Company, 1940), 290. Also cited in Golden, “The Purgation Theory of Catharsis,” 478n3.

¹²⁶ Minturno, *L’Arte Poetica*, 289.

¹²⁷ Pedro Laín-Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, trans. L. J. Rather and John M. Sharp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 230. Also cited in Golden, “The Purgation Theory of Catharsis”: 478.

directly to the noble spectators. In these repeated direct addresses, Aretino simultaneously draws in the audience and turns the spectators into the spectacle themselves.¹²⁸ It is certainly no coincidence that the *Istrione del Prologo* declares that the comedy was borne with this audience in mind (“a contemplazione vostra”), and following these very lines, Aretino provides a description of the city of Rome in which he evokes that very same process:

Ma adesso che ricognoscete che l'è Roma al Coliseo, a la Ritonda e altre cose, e che siate certissimi che dentro vi si farà una comedia, come credete voi che detta comedia abbia nome? Ha nome *La Cortigiana*...¹²⁹

Seen explicitly in the verb *riconoscere* (in sixteenth-century Roman dialect, *ricognoscere*), meaning to recognize, the audience is encouraged to identify their city by its best-known sites, going so far as to link the Roman backdrop with the title of the comedy itself. This moment also marks the first time the comedy's title is explicitly introduced, and indeed it is noteworthy that such an introduction occurs immediately following the direct address to the audience. This ordering thus establishes a greater association between the comedy and its spectators, suggesting that they might even exist in a symbiotic relationship. The title's clever play on words further underscores this association. Whether as a tongue-in-cheek riff on Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano* or as a taunt that likens the comedy's imagined audience of courtiers to a courtesan

¹²⁸ On the specular relationship between dramatic action and viewer reception, see Jane Tylus's chapter on Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* in her monograph, *Writing and Vulnerability in the Late Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 80-112. Kristin Phillips-Court also engages with these ideas in her chapter on *Aminta* in her book *The Perfect Genre* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011); see in particular 146-147. Tylus ultimately argues that Tasso believed in the “essential opacity of the theatrical medium,” (81) and thus in *Aminta*, the playwright seems to resist association with the Este court of Ferrara by rendering it impossible for members of the court to identify with the characters on stage—precisely the opposite strategy that I argue Aretino is deploying with the 1525 *Cortigiana*.

¹²⁹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. (“But now you'll recognize that it's Rome by the Colosseum, by the Ritonda and other things, and you'll be extra certain that within it, a comedy will take place; and how do you all think this comedy is called? She's called *La Cortigiana*...”)

(the literal definition of the term *cortigiana*), the *Istrione del Prologo*'s presentation of the title alludes to both the comedy on stage and the spectators in the audience.¹³⁰

I would now like to turn our attention to Messer Maco, upon whom the remainder of this chapter will focus. A close reading of key scenes that advance Maco's plotline will establish how the comedy offers Maco as an exemplary negative ethical model for the audience.¹³¹ In examining Maco's position as a court outsider who is so desperate to belong *inside* that he is willing to do anything in order to climb its hierarchy, Aretino's imagined spectators are prompted, through the playwright's construction of a *drame à clef*-style satire, to identify with the negative character.¹³² The character of Maco is an amalgamation of critiques of the various negative figures at court—the social-climbing sycophant; the arrogant yet foolish new-comer; the venal and parasitic entourage—designed to combine the worst elements of court society in order to create the perfect foil. In this Aretino was likely inspired both by the artistic process of *contaminatio* that was central to Renaissance literary culture and by Castiglione's own attempt to construct a model courtier in his *Libro del Cortegiano*. The creation of Maco thus illustrates another aspect of Aretino's experimentalism, in which he adopts and redirects the dominant artistic and literary theories of the period to apply them in the formation of this character.

In addition to Maco, *La Cortigiana* features a whole ensemble of recognizable characters, each representing a sort of typified fixture of the Roman court who would have been quite familiar

¹³⁰ The wordplay of the comedy's title has been discussed at length. Raymond Waddington's introduction to Campbell and Sbrocchi's English translation includes a useful overview of the topic; see Aretino, *Cortigiana*, trans. Campbell and Sbrocchi, 12-15.

¹³¹ Maco's role in Aretino's satirical project has been the focus of other studies; for instance, Kristin Phillips-Court argues for a reading of Maco as an "ironic ethical model," though her analysis focuses more Maco's attempt at seducing through poetry a certain Camilla Pisana, with whom he falls in love during his 'studies' to become a courtier. See Kristin Phillips Court, "The Petrarchan Lover in Cinquecento Comedy," *MLN* 125.1 (2010): 117-140, in particular 120; 132-136.

¹³² On Renaissance theater as *drame à clef*, see Giulio Ferroni, "Percorsi della scena cortigiana," in *Il testo e la scena: saggi sul teatro del Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980), 9-41.

to the audience. To play off Maco's foolishness and naivete, we also have Maestro Andrea, who embodies the typical Roman hustler, always lying in wait for the next gullible fool to manipulate and exploit. Moreover, Messer Parabolano from Naples signifies an imagined future Maco, as he too had arrived in Rome from another Italian city in order to climb the social hierarchy of the court. We meet him *after* he has achieved this success, watching as he quickly adapts to his newfound status by exploiting those who remain below him, his servants in particular. Nevertheless, Parabolano's foolishness and naivete endure despite his new title, and much of his storyline involves the tricks his servants play on him in order to enact revenge for his callous treatment of them. Another important group represented in the comedy are the servants, or *famigli*, who attend their masters (there is Sanese, who serves Maco, as well as Rosso and Cappa, who serve Parabolano). Lastly, there are a number of courtiers who provide a broader vision of the court, each offering a different perspective (both positive and negative) on the institution within which they live, exemplified by the characters Flaminio, Valerio, and Sempronio. Taken on the whole, this cast of characters helps to forge a powerful link to reality and embodies the Roman backdrop in a way that the set design alone could not achieve.

Aretino begins the play's action with Maco's entrance in Rome, as the prologue foreshadows. Much like the playwright himself, Messer Maco arrives in the city as a young man in pursuit of his own ambitions. He is arguably the play's most pitifully derisible character; his over-confident naivete defines his relationship with his familiars as well as with his new-found acquaintances and shapes his perspective of the city itself. Upon his arrival in Rome, Maco finds himself so astounded by the metropolis that he is quite ready to believe practically anything he is told while in the Eternal City: "Per certo che Roma è capus mundi e se io non ce veniva [...] ché

mai l'arei creduto che la fussi bella a millanta miglia come è bella Siena.”¹³³ Maco's declaration in the very opening line of the play that “Roma è capus mundi” (“Rome is the capital of the world”) immediately establishes him as the awe-struck and impressionable neophyte recently arrived from the provincial Siena. More significantly, for those spectators knowledgeable in Latin, Maco's assertion is part of an ulterior play on words. While Maco calls Rome the *capus mundi*, the correct Latin term would be *caput* (“head”) or figuratively, “origin” or “source,” or even “capital city.” When Maco refers to Rome as *capus*, rather than *caput*, he reveals himself to be a false pedant, misusing Latin in a failed attempt to demonstrate his learning—or “studiante in libris,” as Aretino called it in the prologue, in another instance of ungrammatical Latin—which conversely reveals how superficial, and indeed *artificial*, his learning actually is.

Several scholars, including Antonio Stäuble, Luciana Zampoli, and Kristin Phillips-Court have examined the typology of the pedant in Cinquecento comedy, and in Aretino's works in particular. According to Zampoli, Aretino was one of the first playwrights to introduce the figure in comedy, who was most identifiable by his sophistic use of Latin, a trope which the playwright employed for phonic or comic effect. More importantly, though, Aretino's sardonic deployment of Latin also served as part of a larger critique of two phenomena: the dishonesty inherent in this cultural “falseness” and feigned knowledge that the pedant embodies (evidenced especially in characters such as the Pedante in Aretino's *Marescalco* and Plataristole in his later *Filosofo*); and the corruption and vice of the clergy, who conceal their immorality behind fake religiosity.¹³⁴

¹³³ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), I.1. (“Certainly Rome is *capus mundi* [‘the capital of the world’], and if I hadn't come here myself [...] I would have never believed that she would be a thousand times more beautiful than Siena.”)

¹³⁴ See Luciana Zampoli, “La retorica in commedia: Aspetti linguistici del teatro comico di Pietro Aretino,” in *Scenery, set, and staging in the Italian Renaissance: studies in the practice of theatre*,” ed. Christopher Cairns (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 154-7, cit. 155. Antonio Stäuble offers a useful taxonomy of the pedant, though he focuses more on the presence of this figure in Aretino's *Marescalco*,

Phillips-Court further examines this use of Latin as an indication of Maco as the derisible Petrarchan lover, a notable character type in Cinquecento comedy of which the pedant is but one iteration.¹³⁵ I would also call attention to Aretino's particular use of ungrammatical Latin, which also arises as a trope in other Renaissance comedies to signal the character's ignorance; the audience's introduction to Maco in I.1 recalls a similar episode in Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (1518), in which the foolish and naïve Messer Nicia engages in an analogous attempt at demonstrating his worldliness by attempting a conversation in Latin, which he both misuses and misunderstands (*Mandragola*, I.2).¹³⁶

In light of these observations, it seems to me that Maco embodies all of these negative affects in a single character. He is an aspiring courtier who believes that the façade of his learned affect will get him one step closer to his goal, but his ostentatious use of Latin serves only to signal his stupidity and naivete as he imagines that, in all of Rome, there could never be another who would recognize his ignorance for what it is. Maco's pretention also illustrates the playwright's well-known dislike of the so-called "high" literary culture that reigned in the humanist circles of his era—circles that so often closed their doors to him, presenting Aretino an additional barrier to the recognition and success he sought and believed to have merited.¹³⁷ As Guido Ruggiero has noted, the situation was further complicated by the fact that Aretino himself had often resorted to

among other Cinquecento comedies; see Antonio Stäuble, *"Parlar per lettera: il pedante nella commedia del Cinquecento e altri saggi sul teatro rinascimentale"* (Milan: Bulzoni, 1991).

¹³⁵ Phillips-Court also makes an argument for viewing Maestro Andrea as yet another faker in the comedy: "the swindler posing as a pedant" who tricks Maco into trusting his alleged expertise in the realm of courtier-making; Phillips Court, "The Petrarchan Lover in Cinquecento Comedy," 121; cit. 132.

¹³⁶ In this particular scene (II.2), Nicia's interlocuter, Callimaco, recognizes that Nicia does not know Latin, and uses this as an opportunity to insult Nicia to his face without his full understanding; in turn, Nicia believes that Callimaco's use of Latin signals his educational background, and trusts him even more. See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, ed. Gian Mario Anselmi (Milan: Mursia, 1984), II.2.

¹³⁷ Waddington, *Aretino's Satyr: Sexuality, Satire, and Self-Projection in Sixteenth-Century Literature and Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), xx-xi.

overt displays of his own “humanist credentials” in order to earn the support and patronage required to survive in Rome, while at the same time including in his works less-than-subtle portrayals of the “stereotypical self-satisfied humanist scholar who is laughed at as a pompous learned fool.”¹³⁸ This tension often manifested in the playwright’s ever-present “combative attitude” towards the traditional literary culture that often excluded him, exacerbated by his continual frustrations with “‘courtly’ dependence and subordinacy,”¹³⁹ for which his writings served as an outlet. In one sense, then, Maco embodies all that Aretino derided in the court environment; yet at the same time, Maco’s need to perform his own display of “humanist credentials” in order to achieve a foothold in an unfamiliar city—much like Aretino himself was compelled to do after the death of his first patron, Agostino Chigi—suggests some inkling of affinity between the author and his character. This dichotomy of derision and understanding thus exemplifies the essence of the 1525 *Cortigiana*’s satire. Rather than signaling the author’s total denunciation of the Roman Court, it aims to reveal its true nature to own members with the hope of enacting change.

Moreover, as Aretino’s learned audience might have grasped, Maco’s use of the term *capus* (as opposed to the correct Latin, *caput*) suggests an additional witticism within this opening joke. While Maco incorrectly uses the term to mean “capital city,” the word does have its own meaning in Latin: a *capus* was a type of fowl, a capon, defined as a male chicken that has been castrated to improve its taste and often fattened for the purposes of eating. Thus, when Maco declares Rome is the *capus* of the world, he “accidentally” insults the city (and by extension, its inhabitants) by likening it to a castrated chicken whose only function was to lie in wait to be devoured by others.

¹³⁸ Guido Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 244-5.

¹³⁹ Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 66-7.

Aretino's depiction of Rome as castrated and therefore impotent proved to be an acute vision of the city's eventual decimation in the Sack of Rome two years later—which Aretino subsequently claimed to have predicted.¹⁴⁰

Moreover, it is worth noting that this opening line is often quoted in the scholarly literature because Aretino chose to revise it in the 1534 redaction: in the second *Cortigiana*, Maco's line becomes "In fine Roma è coda mundi," to which his domestic servant Sanese replies: "Capus, voleste dir voi."¹⁴¹ Scholars such as Larivaille have noted this change as an indication of the intensified satirical attack supposedly exemplified by the 1534 *Cortigiana*; that is, that Rome had fallen from the "head" of the world to its "tail," partly as a consequence of the Sack of Rome.¹⁴² As we have seen, however, an equally sharp version of this joke is already present in the first edition. The notable change between versions comes with the fact that in the 1534 edition, it is Sanese—not Maco—who utters the joke that Rome is the *capus* of the world. With this edit, the line no longer functions as evidence of a false pedantry, but rather signals Sanese's intuitive perception of Rome and marks him from the onset as one of the play's bearers of sarcastic and witty comic relief.

Through this initial introduction, Maco is presented to the audience as the embodiment of two well-known stereotypes: the self-satisfied humanist and the naïve but ambitious newcomer.

¹⁴⁰ For an analysis of Aretino's diverse writings about the Sack of Rome, see Jessica Goethals, "Vanquished Bodies, Weaponized Words: Pietro Aretino's Conflicting Portraits of the Sexes and the Sack of Rome," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 17.1 (2014): 55-78. The Sack was a subject to which the writer would frequently return, leading Goethals to examine the event as a significant *leitmotif* throughout Aretino's entire oeuvre.

¹⁴¹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1534), I.1. ("In the end, Rome is the *coda* [tail] of the world." — "Capus, you mean to say.")

¹⁴² In the words of Larivaille, "Nonostante l'intenzione di ritrarre una Roma « coda mundi », « stata [nel 1527] a purgare i suoi peccati in mano de gli Spagnuoli » e uscita dal « castigo » voluto da Cristo « più scellerata che mai », Aretino, lungi dal limitarsi a uno svecchiamento delle diatribe del 1525, dissemina nella nuova commedia un affresco più ampio e semmai più dissacrante della decadenza romana." Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 188.

Maco is therefore positioned to be ridiculed not only by the other characters in the play but derided by its spectators as well. Yet as we learn more about what brings Maco to Rome, his trajectory would have likely felt familiar to many at the Roman court in the early sixteenth century: though he declares his ultimate intention to become a cardinal, Maco is soon informed by the wily Maestro Andrea that first he must become a courtier at the papal court. In a moment that further reveals the newcomer's naivete, Maestro Andrea convinces Maco to entrust him with the task of "teaching" him how to become the perfect courtier.¹⁴³

The ruse of these lessons is revealed early on in the comedy, in one of the play's most infamous scenes (I.24), when Andrea gives Maco his first lesson in "le prime e principal cose a essere buon cortigiano."¹⁴⁴ The scene remains one of the most remarkable and humorous episodes of the entire comedy, thanks to Aretino's biting depiction of the corrupted and hypocritical mores of the Roman court. It derives its humor primarily from Maestro Andrea's tongue-in-cheek advice on how to thrive in the Roman Court, rendered even more comical by Maco's hesitant acceptance of this advice, which in his naivete he accepts as truth. Yet the brilliance of the scene is found precisely in Aretino's great ability at blurring the lines between reality and satire. The most significant aspect of the jokes at play in the scene lies in the fact that, for each of Maestro Andrea's absurd pronouncements, there exists a kernel of truth, even though that truth may be exaggerated or twisted for comic effect. When Andrea declares, for example, that a good courtier must "saper biastemare et essere eretico,"¹⁴⁵ the joke initially turns on its reversal of expectations. It would have been a generally accepted truth that a good courtier working at the papal court of Rome, seat

¹⁴³ The entire scheme is another jab at Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano*, which outlines in four lengthy books precisely how to transform oneself into the "perfect" courtier.

¹⁴⁴ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), I.24. ("...the first and most important things in being a good courtier.")

¹⁴⁵ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), I.24. ("...know how to blaspheme and how to be heretical.")

of the Holy See, should *not* blaspheme or be heretical, as Maco is rather quick to point out—
 “Cotesto non voglio io fare perché andarei in l’inferno e mal per me”.¹⁴⁶

The humor here lies in the joke’s dark underside, in the blurred lines that playwright creates between the comedy on the stage and realities of the court. The barb evokes similar accusations made by Aretino, by way of Pasquino and his earlier satirical pasquinades, which often targeted the Roman court for its various misdeeds and hypocrisies. As a result, Maestro Andrea’s declaration that in order to become a good courtier, Maco must learn how to both blaspheme and be heretical is not only humorous because it presents an opposite portrait of typical moral “goodness,” but also because it resonates as a thinly veiled Pasquino-style attack on the hypocrisy of his fellow Roman courtiers.

The scene progresses in this same manner as Maestro Andrea attempts to instruct Maco on the “best” ways to be a good courtier, and in doing so, points to the realities of life at the Roman court. Some of Andrea’s insinuations are even quite overt, as in Andrea’s final instructions that “se alcun vi dicessi ch’a Roma c’è coscienza niuna, ridètivene [...] Insomma, se voi sentite mai dire bene de la Corte di Roma, dite a colui che non dice el vero.”¹⁴⁷ Maco’s naivete provides Andrea the opportunity to present a view of the Roman Court that was both caricature and yet would have been wholly recognizable to the audience and indeed, the comic thrust of the scene turns on this very familiarity.

The relationship between Messer Maco and Maestro Andrea continues throughout the play as Andrea continues his efforts to “train” Maco to become a courtier. Later, in II.2, Andrea revisits

¹⁴⁶ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), I.24. “This I don’t want to do because I would go to hell and that would be bad for me.”)

¹⁴⁷ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), I.24. (“If someone tells you that there’s any conscience in Rome, laugh at them about it [...] In conclusion, if you ever hear good things about the Court of Rome, tell that person that he doesn’t speak the truth.”)

Maco's initial training, asking Maco if he remembers what he had taught him ("quello ch'io vi ho insignato"). In order to prove his value as a student and future courtier, Maco begins to playact for his teacher, performing the part of the courtier for approval from his mentor. The performative essence of his newfound knowledge is further emphasized by Maco's own language; when Andrea asks if he remembers his lessons, Maco replies "So fare tutto el mondo!"¹⁴⁸ Maco's use of the verb *fare* here demonstrates that he himself views this new role as a performance—in *doing* a courtier, he is acting the part as taught to him by Maestro Andrea. Andrea eggs him on even further by asking Maco to "do a duke" ("fate el duca") and by giving him cues to help him remember his "lines" ("ma come se risponde ai signori? [...] A le signore? [...] Ai bon compagni?" and so on).¹⁴⁹ Aretino's intention here is to reveal the courtier's studied affectation, aimed at exposing the superficiality and insincerity of the courtier class. The comedy emphasizes these efforts to shape Messer Maco in the mold of the "ideal courtier," which can be understood as a satirical portrait of Castiglione's prescriptions in his *Libro del cortegiano*, which presents an idealistic and unattainable model of the courtier figure. At the same time, this lampooning of the foolish "wannabe" also extends a covert rebuke of the real courtiers of Rome who believed so heartily in their own superiority. Maco's studied performance thus mocks Castiglione's well-known concept of *sprezzatura*—defined by the author as that which "nasconda l'arte e dimostri ciò che si fa e dice

¹⁴⁸ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), II.2. ("I know how to do anyone in the world!")

¹⁴⁹ Interestingly, the line "fare il duca" also occurs in the earlier pasquinade *Lamento de uno Cortegiano*: "Voi pur sapete che matina e sera, / poi tanto fare il duca, in una grotto / la madre di san Luca vi dispera" ["You know too that morning and night, / even then to play the duke, in a grotto / the mother of St. Luke has given up hope for you."]; in Aretino, *Lamento de uno cortegiano*, vv. 112-114, in *Operette politiche e satiriche*, vol. 2. Much like the many jokes of the 1525 *Cortigiana*, the allusions in the *Lamento* are often difficult to decipher.

venir fatto senza fatica e quasi senza pensarci”¹⁵⁰—by revealing, rather than disguising, the art of the profession.

In following Maco’s own supposed transformation—from a Siennese simpleton to the newest courtier of the Roman Court—Aretino lifts the curtain, as it were, to offer a behind-the-scenes view of the reality of “becoming” of a courtier. In III.9-10, Maestro Andrea sets the stage for what will become the final phase of this transformation: Maco’s literal re-shaping “ne le proprie forme.”¹⁵¹ When Andrea suggests that Maco submit himself to “le forme,” he first convinces Maco that this process of “reshaping”—here Aretino uses the verb *rifare*—is precisely the method used by other great courtiers and offers the example of one “Gian Maneti.”¹⁵² Although Maco appears unfamiliar with this figure, spectators might recall his mention during the plot summary of the comedy’s prologue, right in the part of the summary that details Maco’s storyline: “e facilmente gli fa credere ch’un Gioan Manenteda Reggio si fece cortigiano ne le forme.”¹⁵³ According to *Innamorati*, Maneti was a Venetian courtier who appeared frequently in Aretino’s works (he later appears in Aretino’s *Ragionamenti* as well).¹⁵⁴ By offering Maneti, “gran cortigiano and gran musico,”¹⁵⁵ as his *exemplum*, Maestro Andrea legitimizes this process of “reshaping” in the eyes of the credulous Maco, explaining to him that Maneti “si rifece ne le proprie forme come vi farete

¹⁵⁰ Castiglione names the concept of *sprezzatura* for the first time in Book 1 of the *Libro del Cortegiano*; see chapters XXVI and XXIII in particular, in Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, ed. Ettore Bonora (Milan: Mursia, 1991), cit. 62.

¹⁵¹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), III.9. (“... in the proper molds.”)

¹⁵² The text offers two different spellings of this name: “Gioan Manente” in the prologue reference and later, “Gian Maneti” in III.9. *Innamorati*’s critical edition offers no apparent reason for these discrepancies in spelling.

¹⁵³ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. (“...and [Andrea] easily gets [Maco] to believe that one Gioan Manente made himself into a courtier in the molds.”)

¹⁵⁴ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), 138-9n71.

¹⁵⁵ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), III.9. (“A great courtier and great musician.”)

voi.”¹⁵⁶ Through the repeated allusion to Maneti, Aretino establishes a link between Maco’s “makeover” and the prologue’s “Argomento,” connecting the transformation of the aspiring courtier to the metaphor of the laxative that rules the prologue. Following the theory of comedy-as-laxative, Aretino appears to suggest yet again that it is the tale of Maco that will serve as the means of recognition which sparks the remedial process of catharsis in the spectators.

Aretino’s satire emphasizes the physical transformation of the courtier, again suggesting a parodic interpretation of Castiglione’s prescriptions in his *Libro del Cortegiano*. For Castiglione, the ideal courtier constantly performed his role, or what he refers to as “vestirsi un’altra persona.”¹⁵⁷ As Tatiana Korneeva has argued, Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano* “teaches its readers to produce and maintain an image of themselves that allows (indeed encourages) others to view it as a continuous aesthetic performance.”¹⁵⁸ In *La Cortigiana*, Aretino reconfigures Castiglione’s emphasis on this performativity by staging it in the comedy (as in III. 9, when Maco performs the act of performativity) and by literalizing Castiglione’s notion of “vestirsi un’altra persona” in Maco’s ultimate pseudo-transformation “ne le forme.”

When Maco asks Maestro Andrea how this will occur (“O come?”), Andrea explains that to be remade “ne le forme,” one must be held within a set of springs (which he calls *molle*, a sort of mechanical device similar to tongs), in lukewarm water. Characteristic to Aretino’s comedic style, the term *molle* as a synonym for these *forme* contains a dual meaning. The primary definition

¹⁵⁶ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), III.9. (“He remade himself in the proper molds like just you will remake yourself.”)

¹⁵⁷ From Book II. 19 in Castiglione, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, 147; “dressing oneself in another person.” Cit. also in Tatiana Korneeva, *Dramaturgy of the Spectator: Italian Theatre and the Public Sphere: 1600-1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 30.

¹⁵⁸ Korneeva, *Dramaturgy of the Spectator*, 30.

of *molla*, as a noun, is mechanical, designating a type of metal tool, much like a spring.¹⁵⁹ When taken as an adjective, however, the singular form *molle* (plural, *molli*) is used to denote something soft or weak and feeble. By telling Maco that he “starete in molle,” Andrea seems to suggest that the aspiring courtier will remain (*stare*) just as he always was, weak and tender-hearted, incapable of the brutal transformation required of him in order to join the courtier class. When Maco then asks if it will hurt (“Faròmi io male a starci in molle?”), Andrea offers some of his characteristic offhand reassurances that are not very reassuring, comparing the process to the manufacturing of cannons, bells, or towers: “Fansi male le bombarde, le campane e le torre quando le si fanno?”¹⁶⁰ When Maco next asks if he will turn out well, Andrea replies that it is easier to make a man than to make a cannon (“è men fatica a fare un uomo che fare una bombarda”). Again, Aretino’s repeated deployment of the verb *fare* in connection with the process of “becoming” a courtier—rather than the intransitive *divenire* (to become), for example—emphasizes the effort, insincerity, and artificiality of such a transformation. The language of *rifarsi ne le forme* therefore suggests that Messer Maco’s desires to reinvent himself in the ‘mold’ of the ideal courtier can never be fully realized.

The scene ends when Maestro Andrea declares it is time to begin the process, to “ordinare el medico, le forme e le medicine,” language which further associates Maco’s future transformation with a literal somatic procedure requiring supplies and medicine, including an expert to administer them.¹⁶¹ Andrea’s line supports the *beffa* that runs throughout the Maco-Andrea narrative, whereby Andrea convinces Maco to undergo a literal and pseudo-medical

¹⁵⁹ According to the Crusca, *molla* can be defined as “lama di ferro, che ferma da una banda, si piega agevolmente dall’altra, e lasciata libera, ritorna nel suo primo essere, ond’ella fu mossa; serve a diversi usi di serrature, e d’ingegni”; see the Crusca’s entry for “[molla](#).”

¹⁶⁰ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), III.9. (“Will it hurt me to stay there in the springs?”; “Does it hurt the cannons, bells, and towers when they are made?”)

¹⁶¹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), III.9. (“...to arrange the doctor, the molds, and the medicines.”)

procedure in order to complete his transformation as a courtier. When read in conjunction with the medical language of the prologue, however, Andrea's allusion to the process—of arranging medicines, the *forme* to administer them, and a doctor to dispense it all—becomes an ancillary part of the overarching metaphor of purgation and renewal that frames the play itself.

When Maco finally emerges from the “molds” in IV.19 to immediately declare that he has emerged a “new man,” (“mi sento diventato un altro [...] io sono cortigiano e guarito”),¹⁶² his ‘transformation’ signals the inherent affectation of the courtier class, a representational fraud designed to generate an economic one. After having undergone the alleged transformational process of the molds, even Maco's language changes: no longer does he rely on the verb *fare* (to do, to make) or *rifare* (to remake), as he did when he was playacting the role of the courtier in II.2; Maco now shifts to more existential language, seen here in his use of the verbs *diventare* (to become) and *essere* (to be). Because he allowed himself to believe in the real possibility of transformation, goaded on by Andrea's pseudo-medical scheme, Maco has convinced himself that he truly has been remade. With this line, Aretino also ironizes the righteous conversion of which St. Paul speaks in Ephesians 4:22–25:

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.¹⁶³

In these verses, St. Paul calls for the rejection of falsehood in order to be reborn in the image of God, in other words, the creation of a “new self.” Maco's attempted transformation mocks this

¹⁶² Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), IV.19. (“I feel like I've become another [...] I am a courtier and I am cured!”)

¹⁶³ Eph 4: 22-25 NRSV.

idea because his “conversion” is brought about through deceit and trickery, first by those who mislead Maco, and then by Maco himself in his desire to become another.

In the same line of dialogue, when Maco claims to have been restored (“guarito”), the façade of transformation appears to disintegrate. Having emerged from the molds, Maco immediately asks for a mirror, so to gaze upon his newly transformed visage (“Mostratemi lo specchio” and again, “Date qua lo specchio”), and is subsequently horrified by what he sees reflected back at him: “Sono guasto, sono disconcio, io son morto! O che bocca, o che naso!”¹⁶⁴ Maco accuses Andrea and the accompanying “doctor,” a co-conspirator by the name of Maestro Mercurio, of having “changed” (*scambiato*) his appearance in the molds. At this point in the plot, the audience has already learned from Grillo’s soliloquy in IV.13 that Maestro Andrea intends to trick Maco with “uno specchio concavo che mostra li òmini al contrario,” which signals Aretino’s sustained interest in duality yet again.¹⁶⁵ This description, however, does not correspond with the actual effect of a concave mirror, which does not reflect an image “al contrario” (in reverse), but rather functions to magnify the image of the face in the mirror. The comedy of the scene therefore lies precisely in this moment, when Maco finally sees himself—magnified—for what he really is. The audience understands, of course, that Maco’s “transformation” is not real, and that he remains unchanged. Maco’s horror at his magnified likeness in the mirror thus represents a moment of self-awareness that does reflect a genuine transformation—in character, if not in appearance.

This new sense of self-awareness and self-reflection is emphasized by the scene’s repeated allusions to a literal mirror, which in turn calls to mind Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), IV.19. (“Show me the mirror [...] The mirror, give it here”; “I’m ruined, I’m deformed, I’m dead! Oh what mouth, what nose!”)

¹⁶⁵ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), IV.13. (“A concave mirror that shows men the opposite.”)

¹⁶⁶ Of the mirror stage, Lacan writes that it is a “drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its

Critically, for Lacan, the mirror stage represents a constitutive step in the formation of the ego, which occurs through an act of *méconnaissance*, when the infant “misrecognizes” his or her image in the mirror (due to the presence of the mother in the reflection); in other words, the subject identifies with what he or she is not. This misperception leads to a split between image and reality, which turns into the crucial moment of the formation of the self. There is an obvious connection here to drama as a mirror for the spectator, but in the case of Maco, we also have a double *méconnaissance*, where the moment of the formation of Maco’s ego—that part of the mind which, according to Freud, is responsible for a sense of personal identity—results in a false subjectivity, thanks to the trick mirror. Maco’s false subjectivity thereby completes the formation of his false consciousness, which Carl Ratner defines as a “socially induced misrepresentation and misunderstanding of social life” that “sustains oppression by preventing individuals from apprehending, criticizing, and transformation social reality.”¹⁶⁷ Maco’s misrecognition thus comes to embody the false consciousness of the Roman court, enacted by the courtiers whose willing self-deception traps them in the court’s corrupted ecosystem of vice and greed.

The scene comes to a climax when Maestro Andrea attempts to calm Maco and bring him to his senses, imploring Maco to take a good look at himself (“State su e specchiativi bene!”).¹⁶⁸ Read in the context of the play, Andrea’s command to Maco (indicated by his use of the second-person plural imperative, “state su” and “specchiativi”) reflects their mentor-protege relationship. However, in light of Maco’s positioning as a mirror for the audience, or perhaps as a reflection of the spectators’ own false consciousness, I would like to propose an alternative reading. When

totality that I shall call orthopaedic—and, lastly, to the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development.” See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: the first complete English edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006).

¹⁶⁷ Carl Ratner, “False Consciousness,” in the *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, ed. T. Teo (New York: Springer, 2014). Online. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_523.

¹⁶⁸ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), IV.19. (“Get up and take a close look at yourself in the mirror!”)

Andrea reveals Maco's magnified self-image, imploring Maco to take a good look at what he sees reflected back at him, Andrea's command takes on a dual function as a direct address to the play's courtier audience. Though the *voi* form was often used to formally address a singular subject, the *voi* also serves as a literal second-personal plural, "you all," as seen earlier in the prologue's moments of direct address ("Vostre signorie che mi son patrone [...] e mi burlo con voi che sète nobilissimi, costumati e virtuosi").¹⁶⁹ Thus Andrea's directive "state su e specchiativi bene" becomes a call to *consciousness* that segues into a call to *conscience*, imploring those same spectators to awaken themselves from their state of intentional ignorance in order to take a closer look at their own role as willing participants in a system defined by corruption and malfeasance.

Finally, through the trope of the *forme*, the satirization of Maco's manufactured transformation completes the parody of the process that an aspiring courtier undergoes to mold himself to fit the conventions of the Roman court. While the comedy of the plot implies a physical transformation (Maco believing himself to be reborn a proper courtier after subjecting himself to actual molds), the subtext here gestures towards a psychological and perhaps moral change as well—and not for the better. It is worth recalling that the term *forma* has Aristotelean roots, and the concept was later adapted into Christianity, most prominently by Thomas Aquinas. Aretino appears to draw from both of these traditions, as well as from predecessors in the Italian literary canon, in his own conceptualization of these *forme*, a motif which takes on literal and figurative meaning in the comedy. The term is repeated a total of fourteen times throughout the play, almost exclusively in conjunction with the act of making oneself into a courtier, or "farsi cortigiano." Although Maco is not subjected to the actual *forme* until Act IV (as Grillo tells us in IV.13, "messer

¹⁶⁹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. ("My lords, you are my patrons [...] and I make fun of you a bit, since you're all noble, decent, and virtuous.")

Maco è stato in le forme,” though the action occurs off-stage¹⁷⁰), the audience is informed a dozen times beforehand that this will be his “treatment,” beginning with Maco’s introduction in the prologue: “con questa solenne schiocchezza mena questo ineffabile castrone a la stufa, dove gli dice esser le forme che fanno i piú bei cortigiani al mondo.”¹⁷¹ The *forme* thus serve as the *leitmotif* of Maco’s entire storyline, becoming inextricably linked to notion of his “transformation” and providing the key to understanding the underlying implications of his false consciousness.

Again, the philosophical relevance of the *forme* can be traced back to Aristotle, who explored the concepts of matter and form in a number of his works, most especially the *Metaphysics*. According to Aristotelean metaphysics, a thing’s form, rather than its matter, was the active, governing principle that determined its essence and true nature.¹⁷² These ideas were then adapted by the Aristotelean philosopher Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, who posited his own theory of form through a Christian lens, seen in works such as his *Commentary upon the Metaphysics of Aristotle*. The thirteenth-century poet Dante Alighieri was an Aristotelean and a follower of Aquinas and includes both of these philosophical threads in his *Divina Commedia*, one of the foundational works of the Italian literary canon. While Kristin Phillips-Court has discussed the strains of (anti-)Petrarchism found in the comedy, the possibilities of Dantean intertextuality in *La Cortigiana* have not yet been fully explored.

By way of conclusion, I would like to turn our attention to Dante’s own use of the term *forma* to examine its function in the poem, seen in the *forma / norma* rhyming pair—a notable

¹⁷⁰ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), IV.13. (“Messer Maco was in the *forme* [molds].”)

¹⁷¹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), prologue. (“With this terrific piece of foolishness, [Andrea] leads this indescribable blockhead to the public baths, where he tells Maco there are the *forme* [molds] that make the most handsome courtiers in the world.”)

¹⁷² On Aristotle’s theory of form, see Kathrin Koslicki, “The Causal Priority of Form in Aristotle,” *Studia Philosophica Estonica* 7.2 (2014): 113-141; as well as Michael Peramatzis, “What is a Form in Aristotle’s Hylomorphism?” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 32.3 (2015): 195-216.

coupling in that it appears only three times in the entire *Commedia*.¹⁷³ In each instance, the unusual *forma / norma* rhyme relates to a common motif of transformation or change, especially of the self, themes which evoke Maco's own failed attempts at altering his nature in *La Cortigiana*. While Dante employs the motif of metamorphosis throughout the *Commedia* as a way to emphasize issues of embodiment, selfhood, and identity, it is in *Inferno* 25 and 30 that the idea of transmutation takes on a specific function as an agonizing punishment for sinners' attempts at perverting their identity.¹⁷⁴

Inferno 25 details Dante's experiences in the seventh *bolgia*, home to the souls of thieves, who suffer terrible bodily transformations as a punishment for their sins of fraud. The *forma / norma* rhyme appears when Dante attempts to explain the metamorphoses that occur before his eyes: one of three sinners standing before the travelers is attacked by a serpent, who latches his entire reptilian body to that of the shade, "poi s'appiccar, come di calda cera / fossero stati, e mischiar lor colore, / né l'un n'è l'altro già pareva quel ch'era" (vv. 61-63), producing two intermingled, wholly transformed figures.¹⁷⁵ Dante then evokes other well-known metamorphoses from the classical Latin literature of Lucan and Ovid before declaring the superiority of his own invention: "Taccia di Cadmo e d'Arestusa Ovidio, / ché se quello in serpente e quella in fonte / converte poetando, io non lo 'nvidio; / ché due nature mai a fronte a fronte / non trasmutò sì

¹⁷³ The citations of Dante's *Commedia* herein come from the exemplary critical editions by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, and in particular, the *Inferno* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005). Citations and translations of the poem can also be found online through the Digital Dante platform created and maintained by Columbia University (<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/>). The *forma/norma* rhyme appears in *Inferno* 25, *Inferno* 30, and later in *Paradiso* 1, a relatively rare rhyming pair in the *Commedia*.

¹⁷⁴ Teodolina Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 211-212.

¹⁷⁵ "Then just as if their substance were warm wax, they stuck together and they mixed their colors, so neither seemed what he had been before," trans. Mandelbaum via Digital Dante.

ch'amendue le forme / a cambiar lor matera fosser pronte" (vv. 97-102).¹⁷⁶ Here as in Aretino, *forme* is inextricably and painfully linked to the idea of transformation, a process through which essence transmutes its physical shape in the vain hope of accessing wealth and privilege through fraudulent representation.¹⁷⁷ It is precisely this fraudulence that Dante foregrounds with the thieves of the seventh *bolgia*, having differentiated them, for example, from the robbers of the circle of violence. It is merely the fact that they were thieves, Dante illustrates to his reader, but that they sought to misrepresent themselves through artifice, which places these sinners amongst the worst in Hell.

Later, in *Inferno* 30, as Dante continues his travels through the *Malebolge*, the poet employs the term *forma* yet again to describe another process of transformation. The sinners that Dante encounters in *Inferno* 29 and 30 belong to the tenth and worst *bolgia*, to which the diverse types of *falsari* are condemned for eternity. In line with the extraordinarily precise nature of Dante's hierarchy of sin, the poet identifies four separate subcategories among these *falsari*, ranging from the falsifiers of metals (i.e. the alchemists) to the falsifiers of persons and of coin (i.e. the counterfeiters, of identities and of money), finally arriving at the worst of them all, the falsifiers of words, who used their capacity for speech to tell lies.

Significantly, the sinners of this final *bolgia* suffer a corporeal punishment as part of the Dantean *contrapasso*, afflicted with disgusting and deforming diseases: from leprosy, in the case of the alchemists, to dropsy and consumption, as seen in the two subgroups of counterfeiters. As Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi explains, these *falsari* are punished through a physical sickness which "altera e corrompe il loro aspetto fisico come essi alterarono la natura di cioè che

¹⁷⁶ "Let Ovid now be silent, where he tells / of Cadmus, Arethusa; if his verse / has made of one a serpent, one a fountain, / I do not envy him; / he never did / transmute two natures, face to face, so that both forms were ready to exchange their matter," trans. Mandelbaum.

¹⁷⁷ Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, 223-225.

falsificarono.”¹⁷⁸ The egregious nature of their sin manifests in the deformation of their physical selves through the diseases that distort their bodies just as they sought to manipulate others with their falsehoods on earth. Most pertinent to our discussion of Maco’s ‘transformation’ in *La Cortigiana* are those *falsari* who disguised themselves as another and who now suffer a debilitating and permanent loss of identity through the sillness that deforms them. This physical deformation serves to punish them for the denial of their own true identity when they were alive; they are condemned to run around the *bolgia*, naked, pale, and rabid. In the play, Maco too suffers physically as a result of his attempted transformation; Maco’s time “in le forme” literally makes him sick, as Grillo explains in IV.13: “messer Maco è stato in le forme et ha vomitato l’anima.”¹⁷⁹ While the colloquial expression “vomitare l’anima” signals the violence and force of Maco’s retching, when taken literally, the phrasing also evokes Dante’s sinners in *Inferno* 30, who experience painful physical suffering as punishment for their act of falsification.

A fresh examination of *Inferno* 30 thus suggests new meaning for Aretino’s portrayal of Maco’s feigned transformation “ne le forme,” as Maco too seeks to falsify his identity through physical alteration in the hopes of “becoming” a courtier. In this canto, Dante uses the word *forma* precisely to describe the sin of Mirra, a mythological figure from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* who disguised herself as another person in order to seduce her own father: “Questa a peccar con esso così venne, / falsificando sé in altrui forma” (*Inf.* 30, vv. 40-41).¹⁸⁰ The tale of Mirra presents a case of *representational* fraud, or fraudulent impersonation, echoing Maco’s own desire to “falsificar sé in altrui forma” in order to transform himself into the ideal courtier. Following the verses dedicated to Mirra’s story, Dante encounters two more souls whose sins involve cases of

¹⁷⁸ Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, “Introduzione al Canto XXIX,” in Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, 859.

¹⁷⁹ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), IV.13. (“Messer Maco was in the *forme* [molds] and he puked his brains out.”)

¹⁸⁰ “She came to sin with him by falsely taking / another’s shape upon herself,” trans. Mandelbaum.

economic fraud: Maestro Adamo, the forger of the Florentine gold florin, and Sinon, the falsifier of words.

Through the three individual stories told in *Inferno* 30, the theme of economic and representational fraud is foregrounded in the dispute between the forger and the liar. Their sins are highlighted through their performed squabble, which further emphasizes the performative nature of fraud itself. Aretino understood the performative aspects of court life intimately, which he exposes through Maco's 'courtier lessons.' The similarity in name between Dante's Maestro Adamo and Aretino's Maestro Andrea—two scheming falsifiers—signals another commonality between these two texts. Moreover, the altercation between the two sinners in *Inferno* 30 is often invoked as a key example of the poem's low style, where significantly, "low style reveals the truth, while high style hides it," a sentiment that rings as true in Aretino as it does in Dante.¹⁸¹ The canto ends as Virgil scolds Dante for having listened too intently to the sinners' quarrel, explaining that the desire to listen them argue is "bassa voglia" ("ché voler ciò udire è bassa voglia," v. 148).¹⁸² Yet Barolini argues that Virgil is wrong to chastise Dante for the mere act of listening (a chastisement which goes against previous stances Virgil takes in Dante's interactions) and that Dante's impulse is correct, as it represents "the comedic desire to confront evil and to bear witness to all of reality, including Hell."¹⁸³ Thus it appears that Aretino takes literary and moral inspiration from Dante's *Commedia*, evidenced in the common themes of transformation, falsification, and fraud, and by the mutual choice of genre, comedy, aimed at revealing the unvarnished truth of their respective Hells.

¹⁸¹ Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, 233; see also Teodolinda Barolini, "Narrative and Style in Lower Hell," *Annali d'Italianistica* 8 (1990): 314-44.

¹⁸² "...to want to hear such bickering is base," trans. Mandelbaum.

¹⁸³ Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, 238.

As the historical record attests, Aretino was forced to flee Rome shortly after composing *La Cortigiana* in 1525, leaving forever the court and the courtiers he endeavored to reform with his biting satire. Following the assassination attempt in which he was gravely injured, Aretino would never return to Rome again. As a result of these circumstances, the original *Cortigiana* was never performed at the Roman court (or elsewhere, for that matter), its manuscript stowed away until its rediscovery more than three centuries later. The comedy's aim of comic catharsis was therefore left unfulfilled, at least until fate intervened two years later, when Rome and her court would suffer gravely during the Sack at the hands of the mercenary troops of Charles V. It is therefore noteworthy that the metaphors of purgation and remedy central to the 1525 prologue disappear entirely in Aretino's 1534 revisions. Indeed, the revised prologue is reduced by half, and the two bickering *Istrioni* are replaced with a *Gentiluomo* and a *Forestiere* (Gentleman and Stranger, respectively). While some conventional aspects of the prologue remain, for the most part, the 1534 prologue is completely redone. There are, however, two remarkable lines that arrive at the very end of the revised prologue which allude to those recent historical events, reminding the audience of Rome's radical transformation at the hands of foreign invaders:

FORESTIERE: Questa è Roma? Misericordia, io non l'avrei
 mai riconosciuta.

GENTILUOMO: Io vi ricordo ch'ella è stata a purgare i suoi
 peccati in mano de gli Spagnuoli, e ben n'è
 ella ita a non star peggio.¹⁸⁴ (my emphasis)

As the *Forestiere*'s exclamation of surprise suggests, post-Sack Rome has become nearly unrecognizable. Though the first edition of *La Cortigiana* never saw a Roman audience, Aretino's

¹⁸⁴ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1534), prologue. ("STRANGER: This is Rome? Lord have mercy, I would've never recognized her. / GENTLEMAN: I'll remind you that she had her sins purged at the hands of the Spanish, and she's no worse off for it.")

desire to stage Rome's purgation and renewal appears to have portended this cataclysmic event, effectually realizing his intentions more brutally than he could have imagined.

Chapter Four:
Theater of Dissent: Subverting Power in Aretino's *Marescalco* (1533)

If politics is the art of the possible, theatre is the art of the impossible.

—Herbert Blau, *The Impossible Theatre: A Manifesto*

Pietro Aretino's second comedy, *Il Marescalco*, opens with the taunts of Giannicco, a young boy who keeps the company of the eponymous Marescalco, stablemaster to the Duke of Mantua:

*Il mio padron to' moglie,
 il mio padron to' moglie in questa terra,
 in questa terra;
 La torrà, non la torrà,
 ei l'avrà, e non l'avrà in questa sera,
 in questa sera.¹*

'My master takes a wife, my master takes a wife in this city, in this city; He'll take her, he won't take her, he'll have her, he won't have her tonight, tonight.' Intended to agitate the Marescalco, Giannicco's song encapsulates the comedy's plot, in which an unwilling groom faces pressure by the Duke and his courtiers to enter into an unwanted marriage. What is more, Giannicco's song reflects the narrative oscillation that animates Aretino's unique play. Will the Marescalco ultimately concede to the importuning of others to take a wife against his will?

Beginning with the earliest examples from the turn of the sixteenth century, Italian Renaissance comedy has traditionally been marked by a narrative trajectory that propels the plot from chaos to order—in other words, towards a felicitous conclusion. This comic denouement typically pivots on marriage to represent the achievement of happiness and the promise of

¹ Pietro Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, in *Tutte le commedie*, ed. G. B. De Sanctis (Milan: Mursia, 1968), I.1. References are to act and scene.

regeneration. Marriage ensures not only the continuity of humanity but also the revitalization of social and political order. Despite the ubiquitous presence of final marriage scenes in comedy, a number of sixteenth-century texts complicated or challenged this normative form of closure.² Notably, Pietro Aretino dismantles this formal convention, first with his 1525/1534 *Cortigiana*, which features no marriage at all, and later, with the decidedly anti-conjugal *Il Marescalco* (1533/1534), which revolves around a feigned and frightening marriage scheme that results in a different proposition entirely: individual freedom. Like his earlier comedy, *La Cortigiana*, Aretino's *Marescalco* situates the resolution of conflict in the moment in which *la beffa* is exposed and the truth is revealed. In other words, *Il Marescalco*'s happy ending is achieved through the triumph of truth over deceit. For the protagonist, the Duke's stablemaster, happiness signifies preserving his sexual freedom over and against the machinations of others.

Scholars have long noted Pietro Aretino's inclination towards anti-conventionalist writing. In *Il Marescalco*, this anti-conformist bent materializes in the comedy's celebration of one man's resistance to conform to the expectations and demands of others.³ On a broader level, Aretino's play satirizes the dynamics of power, obedience, and dissent at a Renaissance court. In this way, *Il Marescalco* extends the anti-court discourse that the author had initiated in *La Cortigiana*. The

² For more on the convention of the 'happy marriage' in Italian Renaissance comedy, and instances in which playwrights challenge this convention, see Laura Giannetti, "The Playing of Matrimony," in *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 193-232, in particular 198.

³ Critical studies that have informed my view on Pietro Aretino and his comic works are: Giulio Ferroni, *Le voci dell'istrione: Pietro Aretino e la dissoluzione del teatro* (1977); Raymond Waddington, *Aretino's Satyr: Sexuality, Satire, and Self-Projection in Sixteenth-Century Literature and Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Mario Baratto, *Tre studi sul teatro: Ruzante, Aretino, Goldoni* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1964); Giuliano Innamorati, *Tradizione e invenzione in Pietro Aretino* (Messina, Florence: D'Anna, 1957). Christopher Cairns also offers an excellent historical study of the author and his place in Italian literary history; though Cairns's work focuses on the period in Aretino's life that begins with his arrival in Venice in 1527, his second chapter, "The Roots of Power in Venice. II: The Strategies of the *Cortigiana* and *Marescalco*" provides some insights on the influence of Baldassare Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano* on Aretino's two earliest comedies; see Christopher Cairns, *Pietro Aretino and the Republic of Venice: Researches on Aretino and his Circle in Venice, 1527-1556* (Florence: Olschki, 1985), in particular 31-47.

unique textual history of these two works, both written in the mid-1520s but revised and published in close succession once Aretino had settled in Venice, certainly puts them in conversation. Both comedies offer a mirror of early modern court society; while *La Cortigiana* assumes a more overtly satirical tone, *Il Marescalco* nevertheless pursues a critique of power and authority by staging social transgression—the Marescalco’s refusal to take a wife. In the chapter that follows, I will discuss *Il Marescalco* in relation to Aretino’s other works before turning to a close reading of the comedy. I will also contextualize the comedy in a consideration of sixteenth-century gender politics, bringing into the discussion an examination of contemporaneous literary works that treat similar themes. These considerations will be fruitful as we turn to an analysis of the words and actions of the comedy’s four principal characters, including the Marescalco of the play’s title. Ultimately, my analysis aims at elucidating the powerful rhetorical means by which Aretino’s theater uniquely interrogates social expectations surrounding sex, gender, and marriage. By challenging assumptions about matrimony as a compulsory part of the social contract, Aretino’s play affirms the importance of personal freedom and self-determination through the Marescalco’s unwavering dissent.

Far from the hostile environment of the Roman papal court, Aretino situates *Il Marescalco* at the ducal court of Mantua, home to a powerful Duke who remains absent throughout the action.⁴ Scholars have often looked to the historical record in order to better contextualize this play, given the comedy’s backdrop and unseen prime mover, the Duke of Mantua.⁵ When Pietro Aretino fled

⁴ In a way, Aretino’s comedy presents a satirical version of the idealized court of Urbino presented in Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano*. Both texts feature an absent duke, whose authority is enacted through his subjects—though in the case of *Il Cortegiano*, the duke was physically present but often isolated due to infirmity. On *Il Cortegiano* as an idealized portrait of Urbino, see Wayne A. Rebhorn, *Courtly Performances: Masking and Festivity in Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), in particular 53-90.

⁵ This chapter has benefited greatly from previous scholarship on Aretino’s *Marescalco*, his relationship to and experience at the court of Mantua, and the historical contexts that necessarily influenced his

Rome in the summer of 1525 in the wake of an assassination attempt against him, he spent a period of time drifting around Italy in search of support and protection. Having made considerable enemies at the Roman papal court, Aretino eventually arrived the court of Mantua in late 1526, where his old friend, the *marchese* Federico Gonzaga, received him with seemingly open arms. Aretino had previously enjoyed a long sojourn at the Mantuan court some years earlier, having left Rome following the election of Pope Adrian VI during the 1521-22 papal conclave. While in Mantua, Aretino had cultivated a privileged relationship with the *marchese*, who would be granted the title of Duke in 1530. Notably, this second stay at the more provincial Mantuan court was conspicuously short-lived: from the few historical documents available today, it becomes clear that by February or March of 1527, the relationship between the two men had soured significantly, perhaps as a result of Aretino's reprise of that "insolenza pasquinesca" of his Roman days.⁶ In any case, it seems that the constraints and instability of court life had finally become untenable, and so Aretino soon departed for the relative freedom of *La Serenissima*—the Republic of Venice—where he would remain until his death in 1556.

Divided into five acts, *Il Marescalco* takes place over the span of twenty-four hours at the court of Mantua. The action of the play revolves around the titular character: in Act I, the

understanding of marriage, sexuality, and gender. See in particular: Giulio Ferroni, "La costrizione al teatro: *Il Marescalco*," in *Le voci dell'istrione*, 71-102; Michael Sherberg, "Il potere e il piacere: la sodomia del *Marescalco*," in *La rappresentazione dell'altro nei testi del Rinascimento*, ed. Sergio Zatti (Lucca: M. Pacini Fazzi, 1998), 96-112; Deanna Shemek, "Aretino's *Marescalco*: marriage woes and the duke of Mantua," *Renaissance Studies* 16.3 (2002): 366-380; Laura Giannetti, "Pedants, Candlemakers, and Boys: Sodomy and Comedy," as well as "The Playing of Matrimony," in *Lelia's Kiss*, 153-192; 193-232; Andrea Polegato, "Rappresentazione del potere cortigiano nel *Marescalco* di Pietro Aretino," *Incontri* 28.2 (2013): 66-75. The introduction to Sbrocchi and Campbell's English translation of the comedy also provides a thorough overview of this period of the Italian Renaissance and the place of *Il Marescalco* in it; see Pietro Aretino, *The Marescalco*, trans. Leonard G. Sbrocchi and J. Douglas Campbell (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1992).

⁶ For greater detail on the period in Aretino's biography between the attempted assassination in 1525 and his final departure from Mantua in 1527, see Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 1997), 115-129, cit. 127.

hardworking yet fiercely independent Marescalco learns from Giannicco, his “boy” (*ragazzo*), that the Duke has decided to give the Marescalco a wife that very night. An incredulous Marescalco, who has so far in his life avoided settling down, believes it to be a court prank (*burle cortigiane*), but soon learns from others that the news is accurate. Distraught, the Marescalco embarks on an investigation of the matter of his marriage and ponders by what means he can avoid it. In his quest he encounters a cast of characters—the calculating *Balia* (Nurse), the sententious court *Pedante* (Pedant), and the two devious flatterers, the *Cavaliere* (Knight), and the *Conte* (Count), among other recognizable denizens of the court such courtiers, servants, and grooms—who laugh at his distress, cajole him to accept his fate, or try to convince him that the Duke’s decree will benefit him. As a part of these efforts, several characters offer speeches, either in favor or against the institution of marriage, which become a central feature of the play. Importantly, however, the Marescalco is constantly reminded by others that it is the Duke of Mantua alone who controls his fate. Though he never participates in such conversations, the Duke asserts his authoritative presence by devising a practical joke, ostensibly for his own entertainment. The play reaches a climax in Act V, when the Marescalco, unable to avoid his matrimonial fate faints at the altar. He awakens in time to kiss his bride, only to learn what the audience has known since the play’s prologue: the Marescalco’s bride is a page boy in disguise. It is at this moment of revelation that the other characters realize that they, too, had been tricked by the Duke’s scheme to play a practical joke on his stablemaster, and while the Duke’s motives are never explained, the Marescalco, at least, is too relieved to care—and gladder still that his bride is in fact a young boy.

Though Aretino did not publish *Il Marescalco* until 1534, it is generally accepted that Aretino composed an initial version of the comedy a number of years earlier.⁷ Unlike the first

⁷ According to Larivaille, though the first edition of the *Marescalco* was “datata «del mese di febraro» 1533,” it was in fact published in the following year, in February 1534, six months prior to the publication

edition of *La Cortigiana*, however, an original edition of *Il Marescalco* has never been found and thus an understanding of Aretino's process of revision through a comparison of the two editions cannot be realized.⁸ Though there remains considerable debate as to the exact dating of the first composition, it is likely that Aretino composed the comedy during his brief stay in Mantua between December of 1526 and spring of 1527—precisely the moment when Aretino's disillusionment with court life was finally reaching its apex.⁹ Scholars have frequently turned to this dating as part of their critical analyses of the play, given the numerous allusions within the comedy that point to a critique not only of the Mantuan court, but of the power dynamics at play between the ruler and his subjects. While the facts of Aretino's swift departure from Mantua remain unclear, by March 1527 he had established himself in Venice. Aretino praises Venice in his later works as an emblem of freedom, in contrast to those courts where he had lived in perpetual subordination. In a 1537 letter to Giovanni Agnelli,¹⁰ Aretino describes in vivid detail this disparity between subservience and the freedom now afforded to him in Venice:

of the *princeps* of his *Cortigiana* in August 1534. See Paul Larivaille, "Nota introduttiva," in Pietro Aretino, *Teatro: Il Marescalco, Lo Ipocrito, Talanta.*, vol. 2 (Roma: Salerno Editrice), 11; as well as Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1997), 180-181.

⁸ Chapter 3 of this dissertation covers the textual history of *La Cortigiana* extensively. It is believed that the trajectory of *Il Marescalco* followed a similar path, that is, written sometime during the mid-1520s, then later revised and published once the playwright has established himself in Venice. Paul Larivaille provides an overview of *Il Marescalco*'s textual history in Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino*, 438n5.

⁹ Luzio (1888), along with Giuliano Innamorati (1966), Giulio Ferroni (1977), and Christopher Cairns (1985), have argued for a dating sometime between December 1526 and spring of 1527, coinciding with Aretino's time in Mantua. Mario Baratto (1964), on the other hand, has suggested a later dating, sometime between 1527 and 1529. In his seminal 1980 thesis on Aretino, Larivaille had originally suggested a dating prior to 30 November 1526, a conclusion which he later recants in his 1997 study, *Pietro Aretino*, following the arguments of Giovanni Da Pozzo (1979).

¹⁰ Not much is known about Giovanni Agnelli (which Aretino stylizes in this letter as "M. Giovanni Agnello"). In the collection of Aretino's letters edited by Paolo Procaccioli, he is identified in the index of names as the brother of Benedetto and Girolamo Agnelli and that he served as tutor for Francesco III Gonzaga (1533-1550), son of Federico II Gonzaga; see Pietro Aretino, *Lettere*, vol. 1, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1997), 661. The *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* reports that he was born in Mantua at the turn of the sixteenth century, and by 1532 had become the Mantuan ambassador to the King of Spain on behalf of Duke Federico Gonzaga. It is thus likely that Aretino and Giovanni Agnelli became acquainted during Aretino's stay at the Mantuan court in 1526-1527 and that

Onde vi dico ch'io sto bene, e che la faccio benissimo. E non solo io, che sono atto a stare dove non si sta, e a fare quel che non si fa, ma ogni poltrone starebbe da Papa e la farebbe da Imperadore vivendo dentro a questa città e fuor de le corti. [...] Corte eh? Corte ah? Ci fa piú pro il mangiar pane e scambietti che il fume de le vivande ne i piatti d'argento. Né si potria pagare il merito de la voglia che ti cavi d'una noce, o d'una castagna, o doppio, o inanzi pasto. E sì come non è passione che aggiunga a quella del Cortigiano, che è stanco e non ha da sedere, che ha fame e non po' mangiare, c'ha sonno e bisogna che vegghi, cosí non è consolazione che arrivi a la mia, che siedo quando sono stracco, mangio quando ho fame, e dormo quando ho sonno. E tutte l'ore son l'ore de le mie volontà.¹¹

Illustrated here in stark relief is the difference between Aretino's experience in Venice—in his words, “away from the courts” where “all my hours are spent according to my will”—and the life of a courtier, who cannot satisfy even his most primal needs for food, rest, and basic human dignity. Now that Aretino has escaped the poverty and subservience of court life, he explains, he is free to live as he chooses, ‘eating when he is hungry’ and ‘sleeping when he is tired.’ These lines, written just a few years after the publication of both his early anti-court comedies, capture the ever-present desire for respect and self-determination that pervades these works, a primary thread that undergirds the analyses of this chapter. Through *Il Marescalco*'s central *beffa*—the Duke's scheme to convince the Marescalco to bend to his will, propelled by the court's blind cooperation—the

they kept in touch after Aretino left Mantua and eventually settled in Venice (cfr. “Agnelli, Giovanni,” in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 1 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1960), 418-419).

¹¹ From a letter to M. Giovanni Agnello, 26 November 1537, in Pietro Aretino, n. 254, *Lettere*, vol. 1, 352-354, cit. 352-353. (“So I tell you that I'm fine, and that I'm doing very well. And not only me, who am apt to stay where one is not to stay, and to do what one is not to do, but every slacker too would live like the Pope and do as well as the Emperor, living in this city and away from the courts. Court eh? Court ah? Eating bread and *scambietti* does more for us than the odor of food on silver platters. And you can't put a price on the satisfaction that comes from a walnut or a chestnut, before or after a meal. And since it's not passion that increases for the courtier, who is tired and cannot sit, who is hungry and cannot eat, who is sleepy and must keep his eyes open, so it is not consolation that comes to me, sitting when I am tired, eating when I am hungry, and sleeping when I am sleepy. And all the hours are the hours of my desire.”) Many thanks to Samantha Mattocci for her insights on Aretino's cryptic language in this letter.

play reveals its deeper concerns with the expression of free will, the dynamics of power at court, and the social anxieties surrounding acts of non-conformity in Renaissance society.

I begin my inquiry by considering the historical context of Italian Renaissance culture, including some socio-cultural norms regarding gender, sex, and marriage that permeate Aretino's comedy. By expanding this examination to include a number of humanist works that explore these themes (the Renaissance dialogue, in particular), I aim to show how *Il Marescalco* in turn challenges some of the accepted precepts of this era. I am particularly interested in how the comedy interrogates early modern understandings of sexuality and gender roles, performed on stage just as they were performed in the public space of the court. To get at the heart of these issues, my analyses will focus on a number of the play's speeches to explore how these discourses reiterate and reinforce traditional gender roles through the coercive promotion of heteronormative masculinity. Finally, I will consider the ways in which the comedy engages with and enacts dissent, and in particular, how the staging of dissent through comedy questions and subverts those mores that animate *Il Marescalco*'s plot.

In light of these considerations, the present chapter further intends to analyze the behavior of the other characters towards the Marescalco and on behalf of the Duke. Through their speech in the comedy, these figures emphasize heteronormative norms and beliefs regarding gender roles and marriage. At the same time, however, the members of the Mantua court who perpetuate these normative values by attempting to enforce them—from masters and courtiers to servants, pages, and even a wet nurse—should be understood within the wider context of the court hierarchies of power. In this sense, each character is subsumed by a political and socio-cultural system that requires their conformity both as a means of survival in a patriarchal and monarchical system and as a means of personal advancement, regardless of the cost to their individual agency. What is

striking about the comedy, therefore, is the resoluteness of the Marescalco's resistance, which signals other possible ways of living that prioritize self-determination over security or self-aggrandizement. Though the Marescalco may be aware that he is fighting a futile battle, his resistance to conformity delivers Aretino's critique of court culture, which relies on those same social practices to perpetuate and extend its own power. By staging dissent, Aretino proffers to his audience a new social consciousness—one that aspires to reclaim the spirit of individualism that had propelled the Italian Renaissance.

Scholarship on *Il Marescalco* has predominantly focused on the invisible hand of the Duke felt throughout the play. His omnipresent yet invisible authority impels his courtiers to carry out his wishes or else risk incurring his ire. I find it especially noteworthy that in this particular comedy—unlike in *La Cortigiana*—nearly all of the characters, including the absent Duke, have not been given proper names but are instead identified solely by their occupation at court. There is, of course, the Marescalco, along with his Nurse, the Pedant, the Knight, and the Count. We also encounter diverse servants who identified both by their occupation as well as by whom they serve, such as the *Paggio del Cavaliere* (Knight's page), *Staffiere del Duca* (Duke's groom), and *Staffiere* and *Fantesca del Conte* (Count's groom and maidservant). In fact, of the twenty-one characters identified in the *dramatis personae*, only five are given a proper name: Giannicco, Messer Jacopo, Ambrogio, Carlo (the cross-dressing page who meets the Marescalco at the altar), and Messer Phebus.¹² One effect of this depersonalization is to render these characters synonymous with the

¹² Ferroni distinguishes between comedy's two dimensions: its form and structure, on the one hand, and its anthropological implications, on the other, which are revealed through the character types that embody different facets of humanity. According to Ferroni, this anthropological approach to comedy is not an inheritance from the Roman comic tradition, but rather a wholly Machiavellian invention that begins with his 1518 *Mandragola*. Aretino's reliance on types in *Il Marescalco* is an extension of this anthropological approach, but without proper names, the types become exaggerated to the point of erasing their humanity. See Giulio Ferroni, «Mutazione» e «riscontro» nel teatro di Machiavelli e altri saggi sulla commedia del Cinquecento (Rome: Bulzoni, 1972), 30-34; 39.

professional positions they hold. Thus, when the audience first meets the Marescalco, or the Nurse, or any of the other nameless characters, they are not provided any information that might allow them to view these characters as fully formed, autonomous beings. This structural aspect of the comedy reflects the lack of individuality and self-determination that these characters experience in the court environment, underscoring their expendability, or at the very least their interchangeability. As servants and courtiers identified only by their role in service to the court, their actions in the comedy serve as an incisive examination of power dynamics at court and the ways in which that power is enforced. Moreover, scholars such as Andrea Polegato and Michael Sherberg have described how *Il Marescalco*'s plot revolves not around the Marescalco's refusal to marry but focuses instead on the courtiers' campaign to enforce the Duke's command.¹³ This chapter expands on these observations to examine how the Marescalco's resistance manifests his desire to subvert certain societal expectations in order to forge a new type of masculinity centered on autonomy, agency, and freedom. In this view, Aretino's own writing and imagined staging of the play can be viewed as an effort by the playwright to both reclaim agency and to illuminate for the courtier class a different path of self-determination.

Early modern drama—and sixteenth-century comedy in particular—serves as an especially reliable source of information regarding social and cultural norms and practices; while not a direct reflection of social reality, Renaissance comedy frequently dealt in a number of stereotypes which in turn illuminate the concerns, anxieties, values, and beliefs of the culture in which they existed.¹⁴ Examining the presence of transgressive acts on the Renaissance stage also reveals a more

¹³ See Polegato, "La rappresentazione del potere cortigiano": 66-75; as well as Sherberg, "Il potere e il piacere": 96-112. Both argue that Aretino's comedy takes aim not at the Duke and his omnipotent power, but rather at the courtiers themselves, who endeavor to carry out the Duke's will in order to curry favor with him and thereby protect their own status at court.

¹⁴ Peter Burke, *The historical anthropology of early modern Italy: Essays on perception and communication* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 23.

subversive function of comedy, one which harkens back to comedy's carnivalesque origins.¹⁵ Interrogating theater's performative aspects provides an opportunity individual attempts to formulate social identity involve the cultivation of a self for public consumption.

If we are to understand gender (and in this case, masculinity) to be performative, as it is considered today, the theater provides a crucial space for exploring questions surrounding identity, self-presentation, and gender performance in sixteenth-century Italy. While the theory of gender performativity gained critical prominence in the late twentieth century with Judith Butler's influential work in feminist criticism, particularly with her groundbreaking *Gender Trouble* (1990),¹⁶ the idea of gender as performative, or rather, as projected and performed through everyday acts, was a key part of Renaissance 'self-fashioning' and identity formation as well. As Judith C. Brown explains, in seeking to understand the past, the category of 'gender' allows us to examine "the ways in which men and women interpreted the meaning of being male and female"¹⁷—that is, how the social construction of gendered identities was an integral part of the social and cultural experiences of individuals of both sexes.¹⁸ Yet, as Butler so powerfully argued, it is not enough to recognize the socially constructed nature of gender, but to understand the ways

¹⁵ Giannetti notes that "the presence of such transgressive deeds in comedies has also been explained in terms of anthropological theories about social 'escape valves' provided by festive or humorous moments of reversal of the normal order," which were socially permissible at certain approved times—like during Carnival—and allowed for a temporary loosening of social control and self-discipline (Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss*, 197). Other foundational studies on the idea of 'upside down time' include Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, revised reprint (Aldershot, UK: Scolar Press, 1994); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁷ Brown, *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, 4.

¹⁸ For a fascinating study of masculine gender performativity in Renaissance Italy, see Douglas Biow, "Facing the Day: Reflections on a Sudden Change in Fashion and the Magisterial Beard," and "Manly Matters: Reflections on Giordano Bruno's *Candelaio*, and the Theatrical and Social Function of Beards in Sixteenth-Century Italy," in *On The Importance of Being An Individual in Renaissance Italy: Men, Their Professions, and Their Beards* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 181-206, 207-224.

in which these social constructions are *performed*. The idea of performativity, and more specifically the performativity of the self, was of great concern especially to men during the Italian Renaissance.¹⁹ This sense of masculine identity provides the subtext to *Il Marescalco*, as our stablemaster repeatedly questions the normative masculinity imposed on him by the Duke, as well as by his fellow courtiers.

As Butler notes, it was Michel Foucault who pointed out that “juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent” (original emphasis).²⁰ These systems, which produce political structures to reinforce and perpetuate them, therefore regulate and control the individuals that exist within them, and are, “by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures.”²¹ In the sixteenth century, marriage as a social and political institution was understood as a natural, essential, and inevitable structure, and it is these normative beliefs that drive the central tensions of *Il Marescalco*. A man must take a wife in marriage because it is not only expected of him in order to establish his rightful place in society, but also because it reifies and proclaims his masculinity and manhood for his community at large. When the Marescalco refuses to accept this definition of the masculine self as defined by gender norms of this period, his assertion of free will threatens to

¹⁹ There has been a growing interest in the field of Masculinity Studies as a part of the ever-expanding discipline of Gender Studies, which has found fruitful ground in the early modern period. Some of the pertinent scholarship informing my understanding of Renaissance conceptualizations of sex, gender, and the self are Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Kathleen P. Long, *High Anxiety: Masculinity in Crisis in Early Modern France* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2002); as well as Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), among others. For the Italian perspective, see Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁰ As cited Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2. See also Michel Foucault, “The Right of Death and Power over Life,” in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 133-159.

²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3.

throw the entire social system into disorder as the will of the Marescalco collides with the authority of the Duke. As Butler asks, “If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?”²² *Il Marescalco* interrogates this question of agency and transformation by reclaiming it through the titular character’s act resistance and dissent.

Il Marescalco in Context: Marriage and Masculinity in Renaissance Italy

Cinquecento comedy has provided valuable insights into the significance of marriage in Italian early modern society and culture. As Laura Giannetti has noted, the marriages presented in sixteenth-century comedy were a mix of more traditional portrayals alongside paradoxical or even more radical depictions. Such a variety of representations seems to suggest that the sixteenth century was a period of significant change with regard to certain social norms and conventions surrounding sex, gender, and patriarchal ideology. Giannetti points out, however, that these developments were not necessarily or inherently positive (nor would it be possible to make a claim one way or the other), but their place of prominence in Renaissance comedy speaks nevertheless to their overall significance.²³ Aretino’s *Marescalco* offers a somewhat transgressive portrayal of marriage, not only by emphasizing the Marescalco’s refusal to wed, but also by staging a variety of voices on the subject: decidedly pro-marriage speeches are tempered by harsher portrayals of married life, as we will see.

Despite the variety of portrayals on the theatrical stage, Renaissance Italy remained a deeply patriarchal and patrilineal society, as the *Marescalco*’s comment attests.²⁴ Adult men were

²² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 11.

²³ Giannetti, *Lelia’s Kiss*, 196-197. See also: Richardson, ““Amore maritale,”” 194-208.

²⁴ There are innumerable excellent studies that examine Italian Renaissance society from the perspective of gender, sex, and the body. Those that have especially informed this chapter are mentioned below. See Judith

expected to eventually “settle down” by taking a wife and starting a family, conduct that was especially important for ruling male elites, who were expected to protect their interests—political, economic, and social—through marriage alliances and the preservation of the patriarchal family line. Key to this social system was producing children, and especially male children, who would become their father’s heirs.²⁵ Thus, the creation or strengthening of familial alliances was another key driving force in the centrality of marriage in Renaissance society. This was especially the case for the wealthy and aristocratic elites, who viewed marriage as another opportunity to solidify or grow their familial interests. As Sharon T. Strocchia explains, for propertied Florentines, alliances made through marriage furthered a family’s plans for social advancement and facilitated the exchange of resources among the parties involved.²⁶ This appears to be the case for ruling (or the otherwise wealthy or well-connected) elites elsewhere in Italy as well, as seen in another literary source which speaks to the significance of marriage to the social order: *Li Nuptiali* by Marco Antonio Altieri (1450-1532).²⁷ Written sometime around the turn of the sixteenth century, Altieri’s

C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, eds., *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London and New York: Longman, 1998); Guido Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Peter Burke, *The historical anthropology of early modern Italy: Essays on perception and communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Tommaso Asarita, *Village Justice: Community, Family, and Popular Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁵ As Christiane Klapisch-Zuber notes, this was primarily a concern of those who had property or other material wealth to bequeath to subsequent generations, and thus it was the merchant class and the aristocracy for whom these issues were especially salient. See Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 19. The anxiety surrounding the anticipated heir is a major theme of Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* (c. 1518).

²⁶ Sharon T. Strocchia, “Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities,” in Brown and Davis, eds., *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, 39-60, and in particular 43-47.

²⁷ Marco Antonio Altieri, *Li Nuptiali*, ed. Enrico Narducci (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 1873, 1995). Narducci’s introduction to the work also provides an essential account of Altieri’s life. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber offers an excellent analysis of Altieri’s dialogue and his underlying political motivations in writing it in her chapter “An Ethnology of Marriage in the Age of Humanism,” in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 247-260. For a historical analysis of the work in conversation with Klapisch-Zuber, see

text is more contemporary than Alberti's *Della famiglia* with respect to Aretino's *Il Marescalco*.²⁸ While Altieri's dialogue focuses primarily on examining specific contemporary marriage rites—that is, the rituals of the marriage ceremony itself—rather than investigating the institution and the values and practices associated with it, his arguments offer yet another perspective on the role and function of marriage in Renaissance society. According to Altieri, the primary aim of marriage was forming alliances, which in turn brought about stability (or rather, “equilibrium between lineages”), social peace, and social renewal. Importantly, prosperous alliances also ensured the future financial and political stability of the families involved, further underscoring the connection between marriage and the state.

Cultural norms related to marriage in Italian Renaissance society therefore found their origins in the social and legal practices governing the transmission of property or other inheritance from one generation to another. The scholarship by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and Sharon T. Strocchia provides some important details regarding historical marriage practices in Renaissance Italy that bear upon the *Marescalco* plot. From at least the thirteenth century onward, it was expected that male heirs would inherit an equal share of the father's estate, while female heirs were wholly excluded, except for provisions made for their dowry (which would eventually pass into the hands of their future husband). Moreover, while women typically married by the age of

Stephen Kolsky, “Culture and Politics in Renaissance Rome: Marco Antonio Altieri's Roman Weddings,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 40.1 (1987): 49-90. For both scholars, Altieri represents, and indeed speaks on behalf of a Roman nobility that considered itself ‘oppressed’ by the growing power of the Roman papal court, which allegedly kept the noble class away from its affairs.

²⁸ Marco Antonio Altieri was born in Rome in 1450 to a wealthy and noble Roman family and died in 1532 after a life of public and civic engagement, having held a number of offices and cultivating a vast network of friends and associates. Additionally, Altieri was present in Rome during the Sack of 1527, and was even chosen to represent the city in a delegation to meet with Charles III, Duke of Bourbon, who commanded the troops on behalf of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V during the invasion of Rome (during which the duke was killed). Aretino and Altieri were therefore residing in the city at the same time, at least for a period of a few years.

eighteen, men remained unmarried until their mid-twenties, for those living in more rural environments, and until age thirty for those in the city. Lifetime bachelorhood was very rare.²⁹ Though Aretino never indicates a precise age for the Marescalco, certain characters in the play insinuate that he is either approaching this age or has just slightly surpassed it. To provide just one example, the Nurse's chastisement in Act I.6, a scene to which we will return later on in this chapter, underscores the idea that the time has come for the Marescalco to let go of his youthful ways ("lascia andare le gioventudini"), in other words, to grow up, get married, and start a family.

Indeed, the family was considered the fundamental building block of Italian society. Historical documents certainly attest to this reality, but discourses and debates surrounding the proper ordering of family life featured in a number of contemporary humanistic texts as well. As Carla Freccero has pointed out, the explosion of this type of literature during the early modern period indicates that this was also a time of great transition, when many social and cultural norms regarding family and marriage were being negotiated and when the practice of them was changing.³⁰ One of the most cited and well-known of such sources is Leon Battista Alberti's (1404-1472) important dialogue, *I libri della famiglia*, which offers insight into Renaissance marriage in his thorough examination of the role, organization, and management of the family unit in contemporary society, albeit from a rather bourgeois perspective (Alberti himself belonged to the

²⁹ These age ranges would fluctuate slightly with the passage of time; by the late fifteenth century, it would become more common for women to marry at age twenty or twenty-one. Moreover, the practice of primogeniture, in which the firstborn son inherits the whole of his father's estate rather than sharing it equally with his brothers, would become more common among the great Florentine families by the sixteenth century. Put another way, social practices and norms tended to evolve over time, though the history provided here gives some overview of the general expectations and customs of Renaissance society. Klapsich-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 19-20.

³⁰ Carla Freccero, "Economy, Woman, and Renaissance Discourse," in *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. M. Migiel and J. Schiesari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 195.

wealthy merchant class).³¹ Written in the 1430s, Alberti's work discusses a number of interrelated topics, namely marriage, family, the management of the family's estate, children and their education, and the various social relationships that develop in relation to the nuclear family. Alberti's chosen genre, the dialogue, is noteworthy: rather than employing a more prescriptive form (such as the treatise), Alberti prevents the reader from arriving at any one conclusion for the variety of issues raised by the text.³² While the dialogical form allows Alberti to veil his own opinions on these subjects, *Della famiglia* nevertheless provides insight into the familial and interpersonal dynamics of a certain segment of Renaissance society, giving modern readers a glimpse of the general picture of early modern precepts related to the family, friendship, conjugal relations, and more.

Among these, *Della famiglia* considers the definition and value of marriage, and how marriage relates to other key aspects of Renaissance society and culture. In particular, the second

³¹ The scholarship on Alberti's *Della famiglia* is vast. Several critical studies that have guided my own understanding of the text are John M. Najemy, "Giannozzo and His Elders: Alberti's Critique of Renaissance Patriarchy," in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 51-78; John M. Najemy, "Alberti on Love: Musings on Private Transgression and Public Discipline," in *Power, Gender, and Ritual in Europe and the Americas: Essays in Memory of Richard C. Trexler*, eds. Peter Arnade and Michael Rocke (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 135-152; Amyrose McCue Gill, "Rereading *I libri della famiglia*: Leon Battista Alberti on Marriage, *Amicizia* and Conjugal Friendship," *California Italian Studies* 2.2 (2011). Online. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9t3049v8>; and Roberto Cardini, ed., *Leon Battista Alberti: la biblioteca di un umanista* (Florence: Mandragora, 2005). The editions of the primary text consulted for this dissertation are Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, eds. Ruggiero Romano and Alberto Tenenti (Turin: Einaudi, 1969); and the English translation: Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence, Books One-Four*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1969).

³² Najemy, "Gianozzo and His Elders," 51-78; as well as Najemy, "Alberti on Love," 135-152. On the genre of the Renaissance dialogue, I suggest Virginia Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Jon R. Snyder, *Writing the Scene of Speaking: Theories of Dialogue in the Late Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989); and Carla Forno, *'Il libro animato': teoria e scrittura del dialogo nel Cinquecento* (Turin: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1992). Aretino too experimented with the form, having written his own dialogues, known as *I Ragionamenti*, in the period immediately following the publication of *Il Marescalco* (around the year 1536).

of *Della famiglia*'s four books, titled *De re uxoria* ("Concerning Wifely Things"), focuses on the importance of marriage and choosing a wife, as well as the procreation and rearing of children. Early on in book two, the young bachelor Lionardo acknowledges that young men are often disinclined to take a wife because they fear marriage will impede their freedom, viewing marriage and family as a burdensome responsibility they would much rather avoid:

Ma perché la gioventù le più volte in questo non gusta l'utilità della famiglia, dove forse a loro pare soggiogandosi al congiugio perdere molto di sua libertà e licenza del vivere [...] o forse ancora non pochissimo pesa a' giovani avere a reggere sé, e per questo reputano superchio e odioso incarco convenirli sostenere sé e la donna e i figliuoli, e troppo dubitano non potere onesto soddisfare a' bisogni quali di dí in dí colla famiglia crescono, e per questo stimano el letto domestico essere cosa troppo molesta, e fuggono il legittimo e onestissimo accrescere della famiglia.³³

Lionardo's mention of man's desire for "libertà e licenza del vivere" calls to mind the Marescalco's own rationale for shunning marriage: "Io vo' vivere a modo mio, dormir con chi mi piace, mangiare di ciò che mi gusta, senza rimbrotti di moglie" ('I want to live my own way, sleep with whomever I please, eat whatever I want, without a wife's reproaches').³⁴ The Marescalco's line echoes Aretino's aforementioned 1537 letter to Giovanni Agnelli, in which he praises the personal freedom he enjoys in the city of Venice, where "tutte l'ore son l'ore de le mie volontà." In *Della Famiglia*, however, the freedom to make one's own choices can never supersede man's moral and social duty: Lionardo goes on to expound on the vital imperative to grow one's family, not only

³³ Alberti, *Della famiglia*, 128. ("Young people, however, very often do not cherish the good of the family enough to do this. Marriage, perhaps, seems to them to take away their present liberty and freedom [...] Sometimes, too, men find it hard enough to manage one life, and fear as an excessive and undesirable burden the task of supporting a wife and children besides. They may doubt their capacity to maintain in honorable estate a family which grows in needs from day to day. Viewing the conjugal bed as a troublesome responsibility, they then avoid the legitimate and honorable path to increase the size of a family," trans. Watkins, 112.)

³⁴ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.6.

for the good and salvation of the patriline, but also to strengthen the status of the family within the larger society. He does not deny that taking a wife will require some sacrifices, but rather argues that such sacrifices come with great reward. The irony here, as John Najemy has noted, is that Lionardo remains unmarried and childless, despite having reached the appropriate age (twenty-nine) for taking a wife.³⁵ Though he is quick to extoll the great benefits that marriage bestows on men, Lionardo does not seem to have yet been convinced of the advantages himself. This moralizing pretense is a recurrent motif in *Il Marescalco* as well, as we shall see.

The pedantic arguments made by Lionardo to his younger cousin Battista (perhaps intended as a stand-in for the author himself) echo other similar dialogues, such as Antonio Brucioli's *Dialogo del matrimonio* (1526), classified by Brian Richardson as particularly "utilitarian and male-oriented" in its perspective.³⁶ In Brucioli's text, marriage—understood to be a biblical imperative as much as a societal one—serves as an institution aimed at preserving the natural order of the world well as a through the propagation of humankind: "E cosa è più secondo la natura che 'l matrimonio? Essendo naturale tale copula non pure agli uomini, ma ancora a ogni altro genere degli animati, il farsi con la propagazione immortali [...] vedremo in ogni genere di cose aver

³⁵ Najemy, "Giannozzo and His Elders," 67-69.

³⁶ Antonio Brucioli (1498-1566) was an Italian humanist and writer who, in his youth in Florence, took part in the famous meetings of the Orti Oricellari in the gardens of the Palazzo Rucellai (of which Niccolò Machiavelli was another well-known attendee). Brucioli was alleged to have participated in the conspiracy to assassinate Giulio de' Medici (later Pope Clement VII); upon the discovery of the plot, Brucioli fled and eventually landed in Venice, where he first published his *Dialogi della morale philosophia* in 1526 (see Carlo Dionisotti, *Machiavellerie* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 194-201). Brucioli's dialogue on marriage was included in his *Dialogi* on moral philosophy, first printed in 1526 in Venice, which makes it quite contemporary with Aretino's original drafting of *Il Marescalco* around the same period; see Antonio Brucioli, *Dialogi*, ed. Aldo Landi (Naples: Prismi, 1983, 33-48. For an examination of Brucioli's *Dialogo del matrimonio*, see Brian Richardson, "'Amore maritale': Advice on Love and Marriage in the Second Half of the Cinquecento," in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza (London: Legenda, 2000), 195-196.

messo certa specie di congiugio.”³⁷ Brucioli’s moralizing language connects the concept of marriage to both the natural order (“essendo naturale tale copula...”) and man’s desire for immortality (“il farsi immortale”). In *Il Marescalco*, the other characters chastise the Marescalco for failing to accept his natural role as husband and often allude to the Marescalco’s homosexuality (technically a ‘perversion’ of the natural order according to the dogma of the Church). While there are too many instances in the comedy to list in full here, I will provide but one illustrative example from II.7, in an exchange between the Count and the Cavalier when the former declares to the latter: “Per mia fé, signor Cavaliere, che è un tratto bellissimo che il Marchese dia moglie a costui [the Marescalco], che non ha visto mai camiscia di donna.”³⁸ As this line underscores, the two courtiers also seem to suggest that the Marescalco’s disinterest in women signifies his failure to fulfill a masculine definition of virility. Indeed, in our first introduction to the predicament of the Marescalco in the prologue, he is described as one who is “ritroso con le donne, come gli usurai con lo spendere.”³⁹ In characteristic Aretine double-speak, the joke here turns on a pun related to the ambiguous meaning of the word *ritroso*. In one reading of this description, the Marescalco is simply reluctant with women, perhaps a result of timidity. Yet in another interpretation of the term, the Marescalco is not quite reluctant, but rather “backward,” perhaps even averse to women. To guide our interpretation of the term, Aretino’s contemporary, Giovanni della Casa (1503-1556), offers a clear definition of the term in his treatise on manners, *Galateo overo de’ costume* (published posthumously in 1558): “ritrosi sono coloro, che vogliono ogni cosa al contrario degli

³⁷ Brucioli, *Dialogi*, 44. (“What is more natural than matrimony? Since this coupling is natural, not just for me but for every other kind of animate thing, the making of immortality through propagation [...] we will see in every species, having established a certain type of matrimonial union.”)

³⁸ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.7. (“On my faith, good Cavaliere, it’s a beautiful thing that the Marquis wants to give a wife to him, who’s never seen a woman’s underclothes!”)

³⁹ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, prologue. (“reluctant with women, like usurers are with spending money.”)

altri, sì come il vocabolo stesso mostra, perchè a ritroso vale a rovescio.”⁴⁰ This idea of the Marescalco’s so-called backwardness therefore establishes the key through which the audience is primed to understand his character and guides our reading of the subsequent remarks and double-entendres about his attitude and inclinations. Through this singular introduction, the Marescalco is firmly established as not only backward, but more significantly, as “different” (“al contrario”) from everyone else—an outlier.

To return to the notion of man’s desire for immortality ensured through procreation, we find that the theme recurs in this dialogue as the first interlocuter, a fictionalized “Iacopo Alamanni,” attempts to convince the second, “Zanobi Buondelmonte,” to take his rightful place in society by settling down in marriage.⁴¹ Along with Antonio Brucioli, Zanobi Buondelmonte was a well-known frequenter of the Orti Oricellari, where he also made the acquaintance of Niccolò Machiavelli, to whom his *Discorsi* was later dedicated.⁴² The dialogical “Alamanni” seems especially concerned that a promising political figure such as Buondelmonte would be uninterested in, and indeed opposed to, continuing his lineage through marriage and procreation. Though

⁴⁰ Giovanni Della Casa, *Galateo overo de’ costume*, ed. Stefano Prandi (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), 14. (“*Ritrosi* are those who want the opposite of what others want, as the word itself demonstrates, because *ritroso* means ‘backwards.’”)

⁴¹ Not much is known about the historical figure of Iacopo Alamanni, except that he was the son of one Antonio Alamanni, an anti-Medicean politician (b. 1464, d. 1528) and author of a work of poetry entitled *Rime*. It is not immediately clear why Brucioli would have chosen Iacopo to represent this pro-marriage view. See Brucioli, *Dialogi*, 34n2, n5.

⁴² Zanobi Buondelmonte (1491-1527, also written as Buondelmonti) was a well-known political figure and contemporary of Brucioli as well as Machiavelli, all of whom likely acquainted at the Orti Oricellari. Initially a member of the Medicean circle through Giulio de’ Medici, he became disillusioned with his unfulfilled promises of constitutional reform in Florence. Buondelmonte thus found himself a participant in the 1522 conspiracy to assassinate Giulio de’ Medici and change the Florentine government, and upon its failure Buondelmonte was forced to flee the city. He later returned in 1527 after the fall of the Medici regime, where he participated in the new Florentine government. He died soon after while on a diplomatic mission, after having contracted the plague. During his lifetime, he cultivated many friendships with many of the leading thinkers, writers, and politicians, leaving behind a significant cultural legacy despite his failing to achieve great political success. See “Buondelmonti, Zanobi,” in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, vol. XV (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1972), 226-230.

unrelated to the promise of a burgeoning political career, the Pedant advances a similar logic with the Marescalco, connecting the Duke's imposition of marriage to the necessity to 'go forth and multiply' ("perché l'umano genere cresca e moltiplichi").⁴³ While in the comedy the Pedant engages in a far more moralistic and theological argumentation than that offered either by Lionardo in Alberti's *Della famiglia* or by Alamanni in Brucioli's *Dialogo del matrimonio*, all these arguments advance a patriarchal worldview that necessitates a man taking his rightful place in society through marriage and procreation. The Marescalco's rejection of this perspective and his desire to "vivere a modo mio" therefore upend this essentialist view of masculinity as he advocates for a self-determined life.

Brucioli's patriarchal and masculinist perspective continues in the third dialogue of the work, *Dialogo dello ufficio della moglie*, in which the interlocuter Lucia (who bears the same name as Brucioli's own wife) explains that in order to be a good and successful wife, one must submit entirely to her husband, ensuring that nothing disturbs his peace, offends him, or causes him ire ("bisogna che tu faccia ogni tuo sforzo di essere tu gioconda al marito in tutte le cose [...] e debba l'onesta moglie comporsi tutta al volere di quello, facendo ogni opera che non accaggia offesa alcuna").⁴⁴ While Lucia continues to discuss with her interlocuter, Elisabetta, the ways in which this is a mutually beneficial arrangement (whereby "anche [i mariti] sono costretti a sopportare molte cose ne' costume nostri"), the central theme remains the wife's subservience to her husband in all things.⁴⁵ Brucioli's assessments seem to contrast in particular with Ludovico Ariosto's advice as espoused in his fifth *Satira* (1523), which similarly focuses on marriage and the ideal

⁴³ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.9.

⁴⁴ "You need to do everything in your power to be pleasing to your husband in all things [...] and an honest wife must comport herself entirely according to his will, making every effort to not cause him offense." Brucioli, *Dialogi*, 50.

⁴⁵ "Husbands are also obliged to put up with our habits." Brucioli, *Dialogi*, 51.

wife. Much like the case of Alberti's Lionardo, Ariosto counsels his cousin Annibale on a subject that to him is wholly foreign, having never been married himself. Although Ariosto includes some of the common themes later treated by Brucioli, such as the *perfezione dell'anima* through matrimony, he takes a different approach in concluding *Satira V* with advice on how to treat his future wife to ensure her loyalty and care: "Falle carezze, et amala con quello / amor che vuoi ch'ella ami te; aggradisci, / e ciò che fa per te paiati bello. / Se pur tal volta errasse, l'ammonisci / senza ira, con amore" (vv. 253-257).⁴⁶ These verses advise a gentle and loving approach and suggest a reciprocity of affections that might strike today's reader as surprisingly modern. Ariosto expands the conversation around marriage to include advice on how to keep one's wife happy, which implies the inherent risk in having an infelicitous union. An unsatisfied wife may find solace in the arms of another man, risking the dreaded 'corni,' or cuckhold's horns, which would expose the husband to social ridicule. Despite these sympathetic lines, then, the text reiterates much of the misogynistic discourse common to the early modern period, though the satiric form itself offers an ironic tone that is lacking in Brucioli.⁴⁷

Again, Renaissance dialogues focusing on domestic matters are generally considered an important source for the investigation of marriage and women's role in the family unit. Despite receiving some criticism from more modern scholars for their misogynistic and patriarchal views

⁴⁶ "Give her caresses and love her with that love with which you want her to love you; appreciate her, and that which she does for you will seem lovely. If she ever errs, admonish her without anger, [but] with love." Ludovico Ariosto, *Satire*, ed. Guido Davico Bonino (Milan: Rizzoli, 1983), 94.

⁴⁷ See, for example, the lines that recommend marrying a woman who is ten to twelve years younger than her husband ("De dieci anni o di dodici, se fai / per mio consiglio, fia di te minore; / di pare o di più età non la tòr mai," vv. 187-189), or that encourage finding a woman who is pleasing, seen but not heard, unceasingly hardworking, polished and delicate—among many other necessary qualities ("Sia piacevole, cortese, sia d'ogni atto / di superbia nimica, sia gioconda, / non mesta mai, non mai col ciglio attratto. / Sia vergognosa; ascolti e non risponda per te dove tu sia; né cessa mai, né mai stia in ozio; sia polita e monda," vv. 181-186); in Ariosto, *Satire*, 91.

(see, for example, Carla Freccero's critique of the third book of Alberti's *Della Famiglia*⁴⁸), these texts were nevertheless a reflection of the attitudes and beliefs of their era. Moreover, as John Najemy has argued, such interpretations neglect to consider the dialogical form, employed in this case by Alberti to interrogate the patriarchal ideology of Florentine patrician society in an effort to "dramatize its shaky foundations and self-defeating contradictions."⁴⁹ It may be worth pointing out the critic's use of the verb "dramatize" to suggest that Najemy's argument seems to gesture towards the underlying connection between the dialogue form and the theatrical drama. He asserts that *Della famiglia* can be interpreted as a parody of early modern patriarchal norms, a view which aligns with my reading of *Il Marescalco* as a satirical critique of marriage as a compulsory social practice—which in turn combines with the author's criticism of court authority. Though the genres are distinct, I would argue that both texts engage in a dramatization, even exaggeration, of social practices that aims at revealing their constructed and arbitrary nature. Further connecting it to the dramatic arts, the dialogical form itself aims at portraying actual conversation, which may or may have happened in real life.⁵⁰ In this way, the theater and the Renaissance dialogue indeed have much in common, as each in its own way "portrays and comments on the act of communication."⁵¹ While Virginia Cox's observation regards the dialogue exclusively, I would like to suggest here

⁴⁸ Carla Freccero offers a thorough discussion of book's treatment of women as commodity, namely through the figure of Giannozzo Alberti's wife; see Freccero, "Economy, Woman, and Renaissance Discourse," in particular 196—207.

⁴⁹ Najemy, "Giannozzo and His Elders," 54.

⁵⁰ David Marsh's *Il Quattrocento Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1980) is another critical study that informs my understanding of the form. Marsh observes that the philosophical dialogues of the fifteenth century emerge from the Ciceronian tradition, advanced by humanist writers Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Lorenzo Valla, and Leon Battista Alberti. While Cicero remained a dominant influence, other ancillary traditions also emerged, following three Greek models: the Socratic dialogues of Plato, the dialogue symposia of Xenophon and others, and the comic dialogue of Lucian. Marsh notes how the humanist dialogue adapted and modified the Ciceronian model to make way for more ambiguity in their arguments, and how these new forms combined several traditions to create wholly contemporary works (see in particular 1-23).

⁵¹ See Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue*, 7.

that the idea is equally applicable to the action on the stage. In his study on the Renaissance dialogue, Jon R. Snyder offers a parallel claim with his argument that dialogical writing represents a “scene of speaking,” an idea that, like Cox’s, co-opts the language of the theater to illustrate the communicative power of the dialogical genre.⁵²

Indeed, much like a Renaissance dialogue, *Il Marescalco* presents a variety of opinions on the subjects of marriage, procreation, and gender roles, as we see in the speeches by characters who aim to persuade the Marescalco to take wife. Aretino appears to have adopted both the *in utramque partem* and the comical-satirical modes of dialogue established by Lucian to explore the questions and issues raised by the comedy.⁵³ Through the voices of the Nurse, Pedant, and Ambrogio in particular, the author offers competing views on marriage and married life—as if to explore all sides of the question—while simultaneously revealing the self-serving and hypocritical nature of such attitudes, which is highlighted by the Marescalco’s continual dissention despite efforts to convince him to conform. In other words, in applying the dialogical form in his comedy, Aretino stages differing perspectives, motivations, and ways of being and presents them to the audience as competing ideas for their consideration. This act in itself extends to the audience a

⁵² The conceptualization of the dialogical form as a “scene of speaking” also inspired the title of Snyder’s monograph, underscoring the centrality of the mimetic fiction that the dialogue represents. In particular, he argues that “this fiction of a scene of speaking [...] is but a strategic maneuver that allows the dialogist to ‘provide [philosophical] support for himself,’ as [early modern literary theorist Carlo] Sigonio phrases it, while apparently subjecting a set of ideas to close scrutiny in the form of a dialogue between speakers with differing points of view.” See Jon R. Snyder, *Writing the Scene of Speaking: Theories of Dialogue in the Late Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), especially pp. 48-50 (cit. 49).

⁵³ The dialogue *in utramque partem* (literally, “on both sides”) involves the exploration of ideas through conversational dialogue, in which interlocutors would ask and answer questions without a specific determined outcome set forth by the author. The comical-satirical mode, pioneered by the ancient satirist and rhetorician Lucian in the second century CE, incorporates irony and parody in order to critique or expose vice, hypocrisy, or stupidity. See Snyder, *Writing the Scene of Speaking*, 68-70, 84-86. It should be further noted that Aretino was especially interested in aligning his public persona with the idea of *utramque partem*, as one of the earliest known portraits of the writer was emblazoned with a similar motto, “*In utrumque paratus*,” meaning “in both prepared.” The portrait was executed sometime by Sebastiano del Piombo between 1520 and 1527 and is currently housed at the Palazzo dei Priori in Arezzo.

level of agency, of free thinking and choice, that is ironically denied to virtually all the characters in the play, and most especially the Marescalco. In this way, Aretino models a theatrical version of the humanist dialogue for his spectators, allowing them a degree of self-determination that mirrors the freedom which the Marescalco seeks for himself in the play.

The texts written by Alberti, Brucioli, and Ariosto anticipate in one way or another the normative discourses presented by certain characters in the play. When taken together, their speeches emphasize the Marescalco's apparent sexual deviance and preference for bachelorhood—as well as court society's desire to enforce his conformity. Many of these comments deal explicitly with the Marescalco's transgressive sexual behavior, which is discussed as an open secret not only among the other courtiers but is remarked upon directly in conversation with the Marescalco himself. Very early on in the comedy (I.2), fellow courtier Jacopo comments on the Marescalco's constant companion, goading him with a double entendre that plays on the effeminate nature of young Giannicco: “Sempre ti trovi in conclavi col tuo pivo” (you're always found in concert with your flute).⁵⁴ Here, *pivo* functions as a triple-entendre, literally meaning “flute,” but also associated with the male sexual organ, and by extension, was used as a designation for a young male homosexual.⁵⁵ This is one of several allusions to the possible sexual relationship between the Marescalco and Giannicco, who is referred to only as his “boy” (*ragazzo*) as previously established, and points to the “open secret” of the Marescalco's homosexual desires.

The comedy's speeches, in particular those performed by the Nurse and the Pedant, underscore the Marescalco's supposed deviance from the social norm in his refusal to marry, and

⁵⁴ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.2.

⁵⁵ This interpretation is guided by the clarifying note in Sbrocchi and Campbell's translation: “*Pivo*, the word for ‘flute,’ ‘pipe,’ etc. developed a number of meanings based on its metaphorical identification with the penis. Chief among them are ‘young male homosexual’ and ‘fop.’” Aretino, *Marescalco*, trans. Sbrocchi and Campbell, 116n4.

aim at coercing him to conform to the expectation of his gender and social standing as a member of court. In a subsequent scene (I. 6) between the Marescalco and the Nurse, she tells him to wake up and leave behind a life of condemnation and sin (“suso destati, et esci di biasimo e di peccato”) and later commands him to ‘tidy up’ (*assettersi*) his honor, ‘let go of his youthful ways,’ and start setting up a household of his own (“assetitati un poco de l’onore, e lascia andare i gioventudini, e comincia a dare principio a la casa tua”).⁵⁶ Important here is the double meaning of *gioventudini*, which could mean either “youthful ways,” or simply just “youths,” and has been suggested by some as a possible allusion to the Marescalco’s sexual interest in young boys.⁵⁷ The Nurse links the Marescalco’s behavior to shame (*biasimo*) and sin (*peccato*) and urges him to consider his reputation and future prospects. According to the Nurse, the only way for the Marescalco to realize his proper role in society is by accepting the Duke’s command to take a wife. As Michael Sherberg has argued, the play’s allusions to the Marescalco’s homosexual behavior are rather secondary to this argument, given that many married men engaged in this libertine behavior in the early modern period. What seems to be the driving force behind the Nurse’s criticism is therefore the Marescalco’s refusal to accept his position in the socio-economic order by establishing his household.

At first glance, it might seem curious that a figure such as a wet nurse would be so vested in the Marescalco’s conformity and obedience. The Nurse is not a formal member of the courtier class, and so if the Marescalco breaks with the normative convention, it does not threaten to disrupt her understanding of the social order in the same way that it might other courtiers. Upon closer examination of her speech, however, it becomes clearer that the Nurse has a clear economic interest

⁵⁶ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.6.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Shemek, “Aretino’s *Marescalco*”: 368n7; as well as Aretino, *Marescalco*, trans. Sbrocchi and Campbell, 117n18.

in the Marescalco's capitulation. Foreshadowing the Pedant's disputation that will follow in a later scene (I.9), the Nurse argues that the purpose of a wife's 'caresses' (which she offers as positive aspect of marriage) is to 'saintly sow the seeds of little children' (*seminare i figliuoletti santamente*). This rhetoric reflects an ideology influenced by the Church around the family unit and the purpose of marriage and echoes the reasoning espoused in the previously mentioned Renaissance dialogues, underlined especially in Brucioli's *Dialoghi*.

The Nurse, however, has already revealed her ulterior motives to the audience—if not to the Marescalco himself—in the prior two scenes (I.4; I.5), first in her brief conversation with Giannicco, then alone in a short soliloquy. In I.4, the Nurse first learns from Giannicco of the Duke's supposed intentions to give a wife to the Marescalco, to whom the wetnurse refers as 'my milk-son' (*mio figliuolo di latte*). She responds so ecstatically to Giannicco's news that she can barely speak: in the play text, her lines here are fully of ellipses, and her speech is a confused mixture of Italian and Latin, which links her linguistically to the falseness of the Pedant's later discourse. In these lines, Nurse finally reveals the truth behind her exhilarated response, that is, the promise of security in her old age: "Certo, certo, s'egli la toglie, ella sarà la suppa della mia vecchiezza."⁵⁸ Noting her emphasis on the future wife (*ella*), the Nurse discloses here that it is not the Marescalco himself who can offer her any advantages, but rather his new bride, who brings the promise of children. Such children, in turn, would ensure that the Nurse retains her position at court as caretaker and nurse. The wife, in other words, will be *la suppa* (a variant of *zuppa*, or soup) of her old age, a guarantee of support for the rest of her life that she hopes to receive with the Marescalco's marriage. With her new scheme in mind, she leaves Giannicco straight away to find the Marescalco to persuade him to accept the Duke's decree. In the brief soliloquy that follows

⁵⁸ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.4. ("Certainly, certainly—if he takes her, she'll be the sustenance of my old age!")

(I.5), the Nurse clarifies her intentions in going to find her “figliuolo”: thanks to her good luck and ‘little bit of brains,’ she intends to manipulate the situation to her benefit to ensure the outcome she desires.⁵⁹ Importantly, these two scenes set the stage for her encounter with the Marescalco in I.6 and provide spectators the key to interpret her insincere speech about the benefits of taking a wife. As one of the first overt attempts to convince the Marescalco to obey the Duke, this interpretive cue arrives early in the action of the play and leads us to equally understand these efforts as bold opportunities for individual personal advancement, or at the very least, as an illustration of the oppressive dynamics of power often perpetuated by the oppressed themselves.

To take this a step further, we might argue that the comedy reveals the true motivations that underlie the perpetuation of these social and cultural practices. The Marescalco’s encounter with the Pedant (*Pedante*) in I.9 offers another fruitful example through an analysis of his own pro-marriage discourse, the second of the play. According to the typology of the Pedant in Renaissance comedy, this character typically represented established institutions or dogmatic views, often with a mix of intellectual sententiousness and fundamental stupidity (illustrated, for example, by a character’s frequent use of incorrect Latin mixed with vernacular speech).⁶⁰

⁵⁹ “Va’ poi tu, e fatti beffe dei sogni; infine i sogni non sono, come la gente gli tiene, beffa no. Non accade più che perciò vada al mio padre spirituale, anzi voglio ritrovare il mio figliuolo [...] Ma eccolo, ventura, Dio, che poco senno basta, disse la buona memoria del mio marito.” Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.5. (“Go ahead and make fun of dreams; in the end, dreams aren’t jokes like people say. Now I don’t need to go to my confessor anymore, I want to find my little boy instead. [...] Here he is! As my late husband would say, with luck, God, a little bit of brains will be enough!”)

⁶⁰ The Pedant is a common character type in Renaissance comedy, one without any clear classical antecedent (though certain traits can be traced across a number of works and characters). According to Antonio Stäuble and others, the Pedant is a wholly new character in comedy that arises in the years immediately following the Sack of Rome in 1527. Stäuble asserts, in fact, that the origins of the character can be located precisely in two comedies in particular, *Il Pedante* by Francesco Belo (published in 1529) and Aretino’s *Marescalco*, published in 1533. Though Stäuble and Cairns do acknowledge *Il Marescalco*’s textual history in passing, I would like to reassert the fact that Aretino’s original draft of the comedy would predate Belo’s *Pedante* by a few years, according to the accepted chronology of its composition. To put it more directly, it would seem that this character type, while existing in more nebulous forms in earlier works, in fact crystalizes with Aretino’s Pedant in *Il Marescalco*. See Antonio Stäuble, «Parlar per lettera»: *il pedante nella commedia del Cinquecento e altri saggi sul teatro rinascimentale* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991), in

Moreover, as Christopher Cairns has noted, another key aspect of the Pedant typology is that the character “rarely has a part to play in the plot of the comedy *of any dramatic significance*” (Cairns’s emphasis).⁶¹ The Pedant’s discourse in I.9 therefore signals his derisible yet superficial presence in the comedy: his speech a comic interlude, a representation of the stuffy pedantry that plagued the renewed interest in classical letters, opposed by notable literary figures such as Pietro Bembo and Aretino himself.⁶²

True to form, *Il Marescalco*’s Pedant signals his presumptuous nature in his very first lines, which he recites entirely in Latin (“Bona dies. Quid agitis, magister mi?”) until the Marescalco begs him to speak plainly (“Parlate per per volgare, ché ho altro da pensare che le vostre astrologie”).⁶³ Though the Pedant shifts to a more vernacular speech, he cannot help but to incorporate certain Latinisms into the dialogue, which creates a link between his discourse, offered in the secular setting of the court, and the dogma of the Church, even before he begins his citations

particular 14-19. For a similar argument on the figure of the Pedant as well as a useful summary of the Pedant’s characteristics, see also Cairns, “The *Marescalco* and the Italian Renaissance Pedant,” in *Pietro Aretino and the Republic of Venice*, 49-68. As Cairns also notes, the first systematic study of the Italian Pedant as a character type can be dated to Arturo Graf’s essay “I Pedanti,” in his 1888 study *Attraverso il Cinquecento*, though it resulted in a taxonomy of the type gathered from a wide range of texts beginning in the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth. See Arturo Graf, “I Pedanti,” in *Attraverso il Cinquecento* (Turin: Loescher, 1888), 171-213. Finally, it should be noted that Kristin Phillips-Court has argued that the figure of the Pedant is a “spin-off” of the Petrarch lover, another well-known type in the Italian literary tradition in her essay on the type in sixteenth-century Italian comedy (see Kristin Phillips-Court, “The Petrarchan Lover in Cinquecento Comedy,” *MLN* 125.1 (2010): 117-140, in particular 121-122).

⁶¹ Cairns, “The *Marescalco* and the Italian Renaissance Pedant,” 50.

⁶² Bembo’s position is clarified most explicitly in his *Prosa della volgar lingua* (1525), in which he advocates for a refined literary vernacular based on textual tradition, as opposed to a literary language that derived from the *lingua parlata*; see Pietro Bembo, “Prosa della volgar lingua,” in *Prosa della volgar lingua; Gli Asolani; Rime*, ed. Carlo Dionisotti (Milan: TEA, 1989; 1993). Aretino’s anti-classicism was also well-known and coupled with his general rejection of Petrarchan convention, which in fact pitted him against the elder Bembo in several respects. On this subject, see Waddington, *Aretino’s Satyr*, in particular chapter 1, “*Ostentatio genitalium*: Revaluing Sexuality,” 3-32 (and especially subsection “Aretino as Counter-Petrarch,” 20-29). For a broader look at Aretino’s “anarchical” approach to theater, I would again point the reader to Ferroni, *Le voci dell’istrione* (1977).

⁶³ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.9. (“Good day, what are you doing, my master? / Speak plainly, for I have other things to think about than your astrologies”).

of the Gospel. Similar to the Nurse's earlier speech, the Pedant's lecture here draws a direct line between marriage and procreation. Furthermore, his emphasize on biblical duty gives the discourse a more sermonic tone, perhaps in an effort to practice for the wedding day, claiming that the Duke requested him to prepare speech ("hammi imposto che ego agam oratiunculam, cioè componga il sermone nunziale, parlandoti idiotamente").⁶⁴ He explains to the Marescalco that, according to the word of the Evangelist, the institution of marriage is the sole legitimate means through which the human race can be regenerated ("perché l'umano genere cresca e multiplichì"), and thus the tree which does not bear fruit must be cut down and burned ("la arbore che non fa frutto, sia tagliata e posta al fuoco").⁶⁵ Thus, the Pedant explains, the Duke has given the Marescalco a wife so that he can fulfill his purpose as prescribed by Scripture, and continues his screed by citing examples from both the Old Testament and the Latin masters where those who were 'sterile' and 'useless' ("sterili e inutili") were expelled from society.

The Pedant's rationalization thus establishes the Marescalco's desire to remain unmarried as a total rejection of his obligation to God and society to procreate through the appropriate means. In other words, the Pedant frames the Marescalco's choices as unnatural and un-productive, implying his continued resistance to the Duke's orders will only lead to his effective banishment from society on earth and eternal damnation in the afterlife. In a subsequent scene (I.11), the Pedant elaborates his point further, explaining that the Marescalco must take a wife "perché la copula carnale è il primo articulo de le divine leggi, imo de le umane, e perché la concupiscenza adultera e le umane leggi e le divine."⁶⁶ The Pedant's reference to the "adulterating" force of *concupiscenza*

⁶⁴ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.9. ("[The Duke] has ordered that *ego agam oratiunculam* [I give a little speech], that is, to speak to you in a way that you'll understand, I am to compose the nuptial sermon.")

⁶⁵ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.9 ("so that the human race may grow and multiply").

⁶⁶ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.10 ("because carnal copulation is the first article of divine law, *imo* of human law, and because concupiscence adulterates both human and divine law").

is especially doctrinal, evoking the arguments of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, in which Augustine is profoundly concerned with "the disease of concupiscence" and other "unclean desires," which clouded his reason and led him to greater sin.⁶⁷ The connection between the Pedant's discourse and the *Confessions* is particularly noteworthy, given text's keen interest the proper nature of marriage and the renunciation of uncontrolled desire and the corrupting influence of sex. Book II, in particular, focuses on Augustine's adolescence, a time in which he was "burning to find satisfaction in hellish pleasures," when "clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence filled the air."⁶⁸ Augustine's renunciation of his "past foulnesses" which "befogged and obscured [his] heart," forsaken so that he might return to a state of unity with God, further call to mind the Nurse's exclamation to the Marescalco in I.6 that he abandon his sinful ways and let go of his 'youth' ("suso destati, et esci di biasmo e peccato," and later "lascia andare le gioventudini").⁶⁹ While the Pedant's excoriations in I.9 and I.10 adopt a similar tone and message, the irony pervading his discourse is later revealed through a violent prank played on him by Giannicco and the Page (*Paggio*) that turns on homoerotic innuendo.⁷⁰ That the Pedant himself might be the one with homosexual proclivities (a fairly common trope associated with the Italian Renaissance Pedant) would thus directly contradict his own edicts about the moral dangers associated with "concupiscenza" and further underscore his hypocrisy.⁷¹

As in the exchange between the Nurse and the Marescalco, the Pedant's discourse also echoes the themes presented in many of the contemporary dialogical works on marriage and the

⁶⁷ See Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 1998, 2008), especially Books II-III and VIII.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 24.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 24; Aretino, *Marescalco*, I.6.

⁷⁰ Michael Sherberg offers keen analysis of this scene (II.1), in which Giannicco and the Page play a practical joke on the Pedant that infers his own homosexual preferences. See Sherberg, "Il potere and il piacere," in particular 105-107.

⁷¹ Cairns, "The *Marescalco* and the Italian Renaissance Pedant," 56.

family, including those examined in this chapter. The structure of the three scenes in question (I.9-I.11) also mirrors the dialogical form by featuring only two interlocutors, one being the principal argumentator who attempts to persuade the other of a certain belief or ideology. Further enmeshing the principal societal and theological concerns of this time period, by imitating and co-opting the dialectic form, the comedy enacts a dramatic examination of the standard ideology on marriage put forth by the normative authorities of the court and Church. As the plot progresses and more characters join in the pressure campaign, the comedy invites us to question their underlying assumptions and motivations and thereby interrogate the systems of power that govern Renaissance society at large.

Michael Sherberg has pursued a parallel line of inquiry, examining why Aretino would choose the trope of sodomy in particular to explore questions of power and oppression. Sherberg similarly revisits the motives offered by the characters when persuading the Marescalco to take a wife, and in particular when these discourses advance children as a positive reason for getting married. In fact, given the rampant misogyny of married men and sodomites alike, and seeing that marriage does not actually prohibit one from pursuing same-sex relations, it appears that economic incentives, intrinsically linked to promise of children, are the only real motivation for marriage.⁷² It is children, in fact, that ultimately distinguish sexual relations that aim at procreation from all the other types of sexual relations, which were broadly defined as diverse forms of sodomy. As Sherberg explains, “I rapporti che mirano alla procreazione trascendono l’immediatezza della relazione, e cioè il piacere, mentre quelli che escludono la riproduzione avrebbero come scopo esclusivo il piacere” (“Sexual relations that aim at procreation transcend the immediacy of the interaction—the pleasure of it—while those relations that exclude reproduction maintain pleasure

⁷² Sherberg, “Il potere e il piacere,” 106-107.

as their exclusive aim').⁷³ Because the Marescalco's desires prioritize his sexual pleasure and personal freedom above any patriarchal duty to beget heirs, his homoerotic desires are cast as dually destructive to the social order, as the Pedant has implied. Though the Pedant's ulterior motives are not as obvious as the Nurse's, it becomes clear from his speeches that he represents a doctrinal position and seeks to perpetuate it, if not through himself, through the control of others' behavior.

Sherberg has also challenged certain assumptions put forth by the scholarship on *Il Marescalco*, namely regarding the Marescalco's homosexuality. While a common interpretation of the play offers the titular character's homosexual preferences as a main motivation behind his refusal to accept a wife as the Duke has commanded, Sherberg points to the numerous ambiguities in the text that do not permit such a clear-cut reading of the Marescalco's desires or disinclinations. The moments throughout the comedy that point or allude to his homosexual preferences come almost exclusively from the other characters at court, and the Marescalco himself never acknowledges that his homosexual desires are the reason behind his dissent. He is, however, vocally adamant about his opposition to marriage—or perhaps more specifically, in Sherberg's analysis, his opposition to *wives*, which reveals the play's misogyny more than its homophobia.⁷⁴ At the same time, I also find that the play's ambiguities work as a powerful means of prompting questions and encouraging skepticism, giving rise to and engage in debates about gender roles, marriage, and proper sexual relations.⁷⁵ The comedy's focus on discourse and speech further

⁷³ Sherberg, "Il potere e il piacere," 107.

⁷⁴ Instances of this ambiguity can be found throughout the play. Sherberg provides an overview of the most salient examples from the text in Sherberg, "Il potere e il piacere," 98-99. For a broader look at the misogynistic tendencies of Renaissance comedy, see Richard Andrews, "Anti-feminism in *Commedia Erudita*," in *Contexts of Renaissance Comedy*, eds. Janet Clare and Roy Eriksen (Oslo: Novus Press, 1997), 11-31.

⁷⁵ My analysis here is influenced by Emma Smith's interpretation of the ambiguities present in William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (written sometime in the early 1590s and first printed in 1623); see

emphasizes this point by foregrounding the very act of interrogation and debate right in the structure of the play. Rather than resolving these debates, however, *Il Marescalco* elevates ambivalence as a significant aspect of the early modern self.

The Marescalco brings this ambiguity to bear in II.6 when he declare: “Io vo’ vivere a mio modo, dormir con chi mi piace, mangiare di ciò che mi gusta, senza rimbrotti di moglie” (‘I want to live my own way, sleep with whomever I please, eat whatever I want, without a wife’s reproaches’).⁷⁶ The tone of the first clause is perfectly ambiguous: does “a modo mio” mean that he only wishes to live freely, or is it a tacit acknowledgement of his peculiar ‘way of being,’ that is, of his desire for young boys? In some ways, the language of “senza rimbrotti di mogli” only furthers the ambiguity: does he want to live without the reproaches of a wife because he prefers the pleasures of boys, or is he merely expressing the common misogynistic impulses of early modern Italian society? Perhaps the line is simply a reflection of the dissatisfactions of court life, a common theme in Aretino’s early works dating back to his earliest *pasquinate*. As we saw in chapter 3’s analyses, the characters in *La Cortigiana* often expressed their frustration with the lack of freedom and respect that defined the life of the courtier. To offer but one example the earlier 1525 edition, the courtier Flaminio laments to fellow courtier Valerio about the abuse and neglect he suffers on account of his terrible master:

FLAMINIO: E però voglio irmi con Dio, ch’almeno averò
un padrone che mi guarderà in volto una volta
el mese e che forse, quand’io gli parlerò, mi
risponderà non ch’io sia pazzo e di mia testa,

Emma Smith, *This is Shakespeare* (New York: Penguin, 2019, 2021), 7-21. Moreover, Michele Marrapodi has pointed to the various “Italianate themes” of *The Taming of the Shrew*, including “il tor moglie” and the *topos* of marriage more broadly, which he analyzes in relation to *Il Marescalco* in particular. See Michele Marrapodi, “The Aretinean Intertext and the Heterodoxy of the *Taming of the Shrew*,” in *Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance: Appropriation, Transformation, Opposition*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2014), 235-256, and in particular 245-255.

⁷⁶ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.6.

e non m'impegnerò la cappa [e] il saio per
cavarne la fame...

VALERIO: I signori vogliono fare a modo loro, essaltare
chi li piace e roinare chi li piace [...] Dove
voi tu ire, adesso, ch'è in disordine tutto il
mondo?

FLAMINIO: Anderò a Mantoa, dove la eccellenzia del
Marchese Federico non nega il pane a
niuno.⁷⁷

Valerio's retort about the 'lords who want to do whatever they like' ("a modo loro") evokes the Marescalco's line about living as he pleases ("a modo mio"), suggesting that no court in Italy is safe from a tyrannical ruler. The moment can perhaps be read as a moment of ironic foreshadowing, given that in the revised *Cortigiana* of 1534, Flaminio's reply changes entirely: "Io me ne andrò forse a Vinegia, ove sono già stato, e arricchirò la povertà mia con la sua libertade, che almeno ivi non è in arbitrio di niun favorito, né di niuna favorita di assassinare i poverini."⁷⁸ In light of his experience at the Mantuan court, the change suggests that Aretino no longer saw fit to name Mantua as a plausible site to escape from Rome. In 1534, he instead names Venice as the new beacon of hope, citing her liberty ("la sua libertade") as the reason that the courtier might escape not only his poverty but the whims of a fickle lord.

⁷⁷ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1525), III.7. ("I want to get out of here, maybe I'll find a master who'll look at me in the face once a month, and that maybe, when I speak to him, he won't tell me that I'm crazy for doing things my way and I won't sell my cloak and tunic to keep me from starving..." / "Masters want to do things their way, advance whomever pleases him and ruin whomever pleases him too [...] Where will you go now that the world is upside-down?" / "I'll go to Mantua, where his excellency the Marquis Federico denies bread to no one...")

⁷⁸ Aretino, *La Cortigiana* (1534), III.7. ("Maybe I'll go to Venice, where I've already been, and I'll enrich my poverty with her liberty, for at least there, poor people aren't assassinated at the whim of any favorite, man or woman.")

To return the question of the Marescalco's desires, which remains a clear focus of the plot regardless of the comedy's ambiguities, I turn to the scholarship by Sherberg, Rocke, and others, which attests to the fact that—despite the heteronormative social practices related to marriage—homoerotic relationships were quite widespread in Italian Renaissance society, and sodomy was a common practice between males.⁷⁹ Such relationships were considered acceptable as long as they remained within certain boundaries and conformed to specific social norms. More specifically, it was common for adult men to “keep” young boys and engage in sexual relations with them until the young boy reached a certain age. With this knowledge, certain moments involving the Marescalco can be understood, at best, as an indication of pederasty more than outright homosexual preferences. Our introduction to the character's peculiar preferences begins in the comedy's prologue, when the *Istrione* explains in the plot summary that “[il Marescalco] sposa per forza un fanciullo, che da fanciulla era vestito. E scopertosi lo inganno, il valente uomo ne ha più allegrezza nel trovarlo maschio, che non ebbe dolore credendolo femina.”⁸⁰ The prologue previews the Marescalco's eventual happiness upon discovering the young boy dressed as a bride, though again, ambiguity reigns: it is unclear whether or not the Marescalco is happy because his ‘bride’ is a young boy or because, in finding a boy under the veil, the Marescalco is relieved to discover that he will not be married that day.⁸¹ Likewise, the assessments of the Marescalco's

⁷⁹ Michael Rocke is one of the foremost scholars on this subject; see in particular Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), and in particular the chapter “Age and Gender in the Social Organization of Sodomy,” 87-111; as well as his chapter “Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy,” in Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, eds., *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), 150-170, which discusses norms and expectations for both women and men, and how the law and court practice aimed at regulating sexual behavior for both genders.

⁸⁰ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, prologue. (“[The Marescalco was forced to marry a young boy, who was dressed as a maiden. And having discovered the trick, the valiant man was happier to have discovered that she was a boy than he was sorry to have believed her a girl.]”)

⁸¹ Sherberg, “Il potere e il piacere,” 99.

situation proffered by the other characters allude almost exclusively to young boys rather than men, as seen for example with Messer Jacopo in I.2, the Nurse in I.6, and Giannicco in II.8.⁸² Giannicco's comment is perhaps the most explicit of them all, as he recounts to the Conte and the Cavaliere his advice to the Marescalco to take a wife, if only to use her as a ruse to lure young men to their home: "Io ho detto che, s'ella è bella e ricca, la toglia a mezzo, perché trionferemo il mondo [...] egli averà da spendere primamente per qualche giorno, poi ella tirerà a casa dei bei giovinetti, ond'egli mangera gli uccelli, ed io la civetta."⁸³ The implication of pederasty is even stronger here, in light of Giannicco's apparent desire to 'take the hen' (*civetta*) for himself while the Marescalco has his fill of the handsome youths (*bei giovinetti*). Giannicco can be counted among the other vociferous advocates of the marriage scheme, and like the Nurse before him, reveals his true intentions to manipulate the Marescalco to satisfy his own desires, though his primary objective remains unclear: does Giannicco want to use the Marescalco to gain access to his beautiful, yet unwanted wife? Or perhaps he simply wants his own version of freedom, no longer wanting to be a *ragazzo* but to become a man in his own right.

Although, as Rocke asserts, the sexual relationship between older men and young boys was fairly commonplace in Renaissance society, the Marescalco's behavior still transgresses the social norm *because* of his refusal to take a wife.⁸⁴ Historical records indicate that young males were considered "minors" up to the age of eighteen, at which point they abandoned the passive role they typically inhabited in these homosexual relationships. If, however, such established norms and

⁸² The first two moments have already been discussed in this chapter: Messer Jacopo's reference to "il tuo pivo" is understood as an allusion to Giannicco as the Marescalco's young, effeminate, homosexual companion, while the Nurse's mention of *gioventudini* can be interpreted as a double entendre (meaning either 'youthful ways' or 'youths').

⁸³ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.8. ("I said that, if she's beautiful and rich, he should take her halfway, that way we'll all have success [...] he'll have to pay up for a few days, then she'll attract all the handsome young men to the house, where he'll have his fill of the cocks (*uccelli*) and I'll have the hen (*civetta*).")

⁸⁴ Rocke, "Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy," 165-170.

practices were infringed, the behavior in question was no longer tolerated but rather considered deviant, transgressive, or even dangerous. A young man who continued to play the passive role in sexual relations with another adult man past his adolescent prime was seen to bring dishonor upon himself and to violate his own manhood—again, perhaps another reason for Giannicco to push the Marescalco toward marriage. Conversely, if an adult male was discovered to have participated in relations as the subordinate or passive partner, he was equally considered to have dishonored himself, having seemingly rejected his rightful dominant role in society. In the case of Renaissance Florence, such men “undermined a collective masculine identity formed around serious, mature governors that was at the center of the city’s public image.”⁸⁵ Florentine elites could hardly permit deviant, passive sexual behavior to undermine the perception of their strength as a political body.

In this context, then, the Marescalco’s ambiguous relationship with Giannicco is not in fact the comedy’s central transgressive act. Rather, it is his reluctance to accept his place in the social order by abandoning his possible relationship with Giannicco and taking a wife that marks him as socially deviant, and his vocal resistance threatens the established social order. Because the comedy associates the pro-marriage, pro-wife speeches with characters who pursue ulterior motives or otherwise strive to uphold the Duke’s interests, it reveals their promotion of marriage as a beneficial institution to be superficial, at best, and coercive and self-serving, at worst. As the Marescalco himself explains in IV.6, “Ma sempre avviene che un che ha rotto il collo in un mal passo, brama che ve lo rompa ognuno.”⁸⁶ The members of the Mantuan court seek to enforce the Marescalco to conform because to permit his transgressive behavior would force them to confront

⁸⁵ Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 104.

⁸⁶ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, IV.6. (“But it always happens that one who breaks his neck because of a misstep wants everyone else to break theirs, too.”)

their own blind deference to the social hierarchy. The Marescalco understands that they cannot tolerate his free choice, so they want to ‘break his neck’ as well.

Perhaps the most interesting example of this concern for the Marescalco’s acquiescence to the Duke, is the discourse by fellow courtier Ambrogio in II. 5, (which) concludes the triptych of speeches presented in the comedy’s first two acts. Unlike the first two cases involving the Nurse and the Pedant, Ambrogio speaks to the Marescalco from his experience as a married man himself. This example is particularly noteworthy, first because it is the longest scene in the entire play. Its length is further emphasized also by the fact that the scene features only two interlocutors (Ambrogio and the Marescalco) and exemplifies the overall dialectical “talky-ness” of the play of the general, a term which I borrow from Marvin Herrick. According to the work of Herrick and Salvatore Di Maria, “talky-ness” is an attribute commonly applied to Italian Renaissance tragedy, in which language and *dianoia*, or thought, take precedence over action.⁸⁷ Herrick first developed this idea in regard to Gian Giorgio Trissino’s *Sofonisba*, written between 1514-1515 and published in 1524—just a short time before Aretino’s own experimentations with theater in 1525 and 1527, and thus not an implausible source of inspiration. Di Maria explains the predilection for this style of theater as the product of the reigning humanist influence of the period, with its emphasis on rhetoric and decorum, which resulted in “a tragedy articulated by words rather than lively action.”⁸⁸

To expand on this idea, I would like to argue that *Il Marescalco* presents the audience a comic

⁸⁷ Both Herrick and Di Maria emphasize the development of action through dialogue as a means of preserving decorum in Italian Renaissance tragedy. For his part, Di Maria criticizes the view of tragedy as “talky,” which for him implied a “static” quality void of meaningful action. Kristin Phillips-Court has challenged these views to understand Trissino’s use of “deliberative rhetoric” as effective means of reconfiguring the maligned character of *Sofonisba* into a “model of grace and piety.” See Marvin T. Herrick, *Italian Renaissance Tragedy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1965), in particular 46-48; Salvatore Di Maria, *The Italian Tragedy in the Renaissance: Cultural Realities and Theatrical Innovations* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002), 30-31, 206; and Kristin Phillips-Court, *The Perfect Genre: Drama and Painting in Renaissance Italy* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 65-66.

⁸⁸ Di Maria, *The Italian Tragedy in the Renaissance*, 30-31.

form of dialectic through its privileging of *dianoia* and rhetoric over action. As illustrated in the dialogue between Ambrogio and the Marescalco in II.6, the comedy appears to ask its spectators to reconsider the essential truth of accepted norms and to question the dictates of the powerful. In his resistance, which he maintains primarily through language, the Marescalco stages for the audience a means of interrogating and challenging assumptions about authority, power, and even marriage.

This interrogation comes to a head in the scene between the Marescalco and Ambrogio, perhaps because for the first time in the play, our protagonist meets someone who he believes will engage him in an honest dialogue. Whereas in his conversations with the Nurse and the Pedant the Marescalco adopted a more combative and argumentative tone in response to their needling, in the scene with his fellow courtier, he assumes the posture of interlocuter commonly found in the Renaissance dialogue. Instead of the sarcastic retorts and obstinance that characterized his earlier exchanges, with Ambrogio the Marescalco propels the conversation forward with questions and frank conversation. The sincerity of their discourse is emphasized early on in their exchange when the Marescalco asks Ambrogio to give him his honest advice, prompting Ambrogio to ask him in turn if he wants the truth or placation:

MARESCALCO: Dammi la fede [...] Tolgola o non la tolgo?
 consigliami in coscienza.

AMBROGIO: Ho io a dire il mio parere per la verità, o per
 sodisfarti?⁸⁹

MARESCALCO: Per la verità.

⁸⁹ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.5.

AMBROGIO: Non la torre, non te ne impacciare, ché per
Dio, per Dio, tu te ne pentirai.⁹⁰

In this exchange, the expressions *dare la fede*, *consigliare in coscienza*, and *per la verità* all underscore the sincerity of their discussion and emphasize Marescalco's trust in Ambrogio's judgements. These lines also mark a change in the discourse on marriage in the comedy: until this point, the Marescalco has stood alone in his opposition to the Duke's scheme. Others have tried to convince him to take a wife for his benefit, or otherwise yield to the Duke's commands so that he does not risk incurring his anger. When the Marescalco encounters Ambrogio and asks for his honest opinion (*parere*), he finally meets another person at court who, at least to a certain extent, is willing to take his side.

What makes their dialogue especially interesting for the purposes of this chapter is precisely this shift that occurs during its course. At the onset of the scene, Ambrogio takes a decidedly pro-marriage, or at least pro-Duke stance, telling the Marescalco: "Giuro a Dio che il Signore ti ha fatto un gran favore; egli ti ha parlato da compagno; or togli la e contentalo con tuo utile."⁹¹ Thus, from the very start, Ambrogio reveals his own underlying motivation, the appeasement of the Duke, an approach he strongly advises to the Marescalco. In Ambrogio's view, the situation is a win-win: if the Marescalco accepts the Duke's order, he will keep his Lord happy (emphasized with the imperative "contentalo") and will have earned himself "un gran favore" that the Marescalco should appreciate rather than refuse. The conversation takes an early unexpected turn when the Marescalco asks Ambrogio if he's ever had a wife, and when Ambrogio responds affirmatively, the Marescalco asks him more pointedly if he would chase after her if she were ever

⁹⁰ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.5. ("Tell me the truth [...] Take her or don't take her? Advise me honestly." / "Do you want to me to tell you my real opinion, or just what you want to hear?" / "Don't take her, don't get bogged down by it, by God, by God, you'll regret it!")

⁹¹ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II. 5. ("I swear to God that our Lord has done you a great favor; he has spoken to you like a friend; now take her and make him happy, to your benefit.")

to leave him (“Ch’ella ti si levassi dinanzi, tu non le giresti dietro per riaverla?”). With this direct question, Ambrogio’s language begins to oscillate:

Le girei e non le girei; pure fa a senno del Signore, e non errerai, perché egli è il diavolo a esser Signore, e bisogna pregare Iddio che non li venga de le voglie, che tosto che gli sono venute, beati coloro che non darebbero un bagaro de l’onore del mondo; ma tacciamo dei signori, ché più pericolo è mentovargli in vano che messer Domenedio, e per tornare a la tua moglie...⁹²

The vacillation leads to Ambrogio’s caveat, which reveals to the Marescalco the true stakes of his situation: the motivation for accepting the Duke’s command is not a matter of whether taking a wife would be the right choice for him personally, but rather of pleasing his powerful yet fickle master, whose potential displeasure presents a significant danger to the Marescalco himself but also to the social order at court. Comparing rulers to the devil himself, Ambrogio offers the Marescalco a clear picture of the risks he faces in refusing a direct command from the Duke, whose name he dare not even mention (“ché più pericolo è mentovargli in vano che messer Domenedio”).

Ambrogio, then, is the first character to present the Marescalco with an opposing picture of the alleged realities of marriage. Giovanni Battista De Sanctis, in his edition of Aretino’s comedies, calls Ambrogio’s speech, in fact, “la palinodia, in fondo, del dire della Balia,”⁹³ a *palinodia* that signals to the audience that there is a different truth lying beneath the surface of their attempts at persuasion. Ambrogio’s discourse consists of lengthy quasi-soliloquies that, to De Sanctis’s point, provide the antithesis to the Nurse’s pronounced inducements. To compare

⁹² Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.5. (“I would and I wouldn’t; but listen to his Excellency and you won’t go wrong, because to be a Lord is like being the devil, and you should pray to God that he doesn’t get any strange desires, because once they’re in his head, blessed are those who wouldn’t give a thing for worldly honors. But let’s not talk about masters, for it’s more dangerous to take their names in vain than God’s. Now, to get back to your wife...”)

⁹³ Aretino, *Tutte le commedie*, ed. G.B. De Sanctis, 56n11.

them more carefully in order to better understand how the contrasting speeches play off each other,

I offer two excerpted examples for closer analysis. First, the Nurse in I.6:

Come la moglie sia il paradiso, ecco che io ti dico. Tu arrivi in casa, e la buona moglie ti viene incontra in capo de la scala ridendo, e con una amorevolezza di cuore, dandoti d'un benvenuto ne l'anima, ti leva la veste da dosso; poi tutta festevole ti si rivolge innanzi, ed essendo sudato, ti asciuga con alcuni panni sì bianchi e sì dilicati, che confortano tutto quanto, e posto il vino in fresco, et apparecchiato la tavola, e fattoti buona pezza venti [...] ti pone a cena, et assettati a sedere, e ti aguzza l'appetito con certi intingoletti, con certi manicaretti, che ne beccherebbero i morti, e mentre mangi, ella non resta mai con le più dolci maniere del mondo di porti avanti ora questa et ora quella vivanda, et ogni buon boccone ti porge, dicendo: mangiate questo, mangiate quest'altro, anche un poco per mio amore, se mi amate; e con simili parole tanto melate, e tanto inzuccherate, che ti mandano non pure in paradiso, ma più suso millanta miglia.⁹⁴

Next, Ambrogio in II.5:

Tu torni la sera a casa stanco, fastidito e pieno di quelli pensieri che ha chi ci vive, ed eccoti la moglie incontra; parti ora questa di tornare a casa? o da le taverne o da le zambracche si viene, ben lo so bene; a questo modo si tratta la buona moglie come sono io? a fare, a far sia; e tu, che ti credi consolare con la cena, entri in collera, e sofferto un pezzo, se le rispondi, ella ti si ficca su gli occhi con le grida: e tu non mi meriti, tu non sei degno di me, e simili altre loro dicerie ritrose, di modo che, fuggita la voglia del mangiare, ti colchi nel letto, ed ella dopo mille rimbrontoli ti entra a lato con uno: sia squartato chi mi ti diede, ad un Conte, ad un Cavaliere potea

⁹⁴ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, I.6: "A wife is paradise—here, let me explain: You arrive home, and your good wife comes to meet you with a smile at the top of the stairs, and with a loving heart, as she gives you a welcome from her very soul, she takes off your coat, cheerfully turns to you, and seeing how sweaty you are, she dries you with a cloth so white and delicate that you feel so comforted. Then, having put out the wine to cool, setting the table, and fanning you for awhile [...] she brings you to dinner, and sitting you down, she entices your appetite with certain little sauces, with certain delicacies that even the dead would peck at. And while you eat, she never lets her sweet worldly manners rest, bringing you now this, now that dish, and with every delicious morsel she serves you, she says: 'eat some of this, now eat some of that, now just a little for my sake, if you love me!' And with such honeyed and sugared words, she sends you not only to paradise but many miles beyond!"

maritarmi, ed entrata a squinternare la sua geonologia, diresti ella è nata del sangue di Gonzaga, cotanta puzza mena.⁹⁵

The ironic power of Ambrogio's sequence here lies in the parallels found with the Nurse's earlier speech, nearly identical in narrative structure, which together work to create a dueling picture of married life. Both describe the same scene: a husband returning from a long day away from the home, tired, "sudato," hungry. Both examples offer a detailed account of the actions of the "(buona) moglie," beginning with the Nurse's overt hyperbole, her own 'honeyed' words mirroring the "parole tanto melate, tanto zuccherate" of the imagined wife. The sharp contrast between Nurse's depiction and the sarcasm and resentment of Ambrogio's portrayal of domestic life, which plays in part on the stereotype of the nagging wife, further confirm Ambrogio's warning of a thing 'too good to be true': "Si contano miracoli de le sue virtù, e non c'è dubbio che, s'elle avessero un'oncia de le migliara de le libre che si gli dà innanzi che si martirino, beato chi le toglie."⁹⁶ Ambrogio's bitter words represent moment of truth-telling which confirms precisely what the Marescalco has feared all along. The rhetorical power of Ambrogio's speech lies, in fact, in its near line-by-line negation of the Nurse's dream world, in which the perfect wife is actualized through her total subservience to her husband. It is interesting, then, that Ambrogio's manifesto of angry male grievances simultaneously acts to undermine the gendered stereotypes so often

⁹⁵ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.5: You come home in the evening, tired, irritated, and full of those thoughts that consume everyone. And look, here comes your wife to meet you; 'You're just coming home now? Coming from the taverns or the wenches, you are—well, I know It well! Is this the way to good wife like me? Go ahead, go ahead' And you, you think you're going to console yourself with your dinner, but now you're in a rage. And you suffer it for a while, but if you answer her, she'll get right in your face with her screaming: 'You don't deserve me, you aren't worthy of me!' and other contrary nonsense like that, such that, having lost the desire to eat, you just go to bed. And she, after a thousand grumbles, gets in alongside you: "The one who gave me to you should be drawn and quartered. I could have married a count, or a cavalier!" And she goes off on a rundown of her entire genealogy—you'd think she was born of Gonzaga blood herself, the way she carries on."

⁹⁶ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.5. ("They're all talking about her virtues, and there's no doubt that if women had a fraction of those qualities they're said to have before they marry, bless those who end up with them.")

presented about women and wives in early modern conduct literature. Ambrogio's wife is not the submissive, quiet, ever-pleasing woman described by the Nurse and so envisioned in the contemporary dialogues that encouraged their young men to find. Ambrogio's wife thus serves as a counter example to those depictions of the perfect wife, as with Ariosto's "piacevole, cortese," "vergognosa," "polita e monda," and offers the play's spectators a comic (albeit severe) portrait of what a 'real' woman is like.

To reiterate, the scene between the Marescalco and Ambrogio is the longest of the play, and so Ambrogio's misogynistic tirade continues, a running list of every gripe a husband has ever had, as the Marescalco eggs him on. Notably, in terms of narrative action, the scene is rather purposeless. After Ambrogio's rambling discourse finally comes to an end and he asks the Marescalco if he wants to know anything more, the Marescalco replies that he is now more convinced than ever ("Altro, ah? io non so ciò che mi vorresti più dire; io sono sì confitto nel mio non volerla per i tuoi ottimi, santi e divini consigli, che non mi sconfiggerebbero dal proposito mio tutti i Duchi del mondo, non che questo di Mantova").⁹⁷ 'More convinced than ever' of his commitment never to commit, the Marescalco is exactly where he was all along, unyielding in his dissent and indignant about the forced nuptials. The scene serves only to embitter him further and give extended stage time to an anti-woman screed by a resentful husband.

Ambrogio's discourse aligns with the Marescalco's own underlying misogynistic impulses and together reflect other anti-feminist literature of the early modern era, as seen in Domenico Barlacchi's *La farsa contro il tor moglie* and other popular sixteenth-century *farse* (a theatrical

⁹⁷ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.5. ("More, eh? I don't know what else you could want to tell me. I'm so resolute in my purpose of not wanting a wife, thanks to your excellent, saintly, and divine advice, that all the dukes in the world couldn't convince me otherwise—let alone our Duke in Mantua.")

genre characterized by burlesque plots and characters).⁹⁸ Together, Ambrogio and the Marescalco represent a common and even popular opinion of wives (and thus the institution of marriage) as tyrannical and, as the Marescalco points out to the Footman (*Staffiere*), this penchant for tyranny gives them something in common with rulers:

STAFFIERE: Sì che non credete che sua Signoria vi faccia ricco?

MARESCALCO: Io credo a Dio, e questi Signori hanno di strani capricci, gran cose è il fatto loro. Se io volessi moglie col dotarla del mio, e ricercassi il suo favore per mille mezzi e con cento mila supplicazioni, non l'averei mai, e perché io non la voglio, me la vuol dare per forza; *eglino sono come le donne*, le quali corrono dietro a chi le fugge, e fuggono chi le seguita, e non hanno altro piacere che far disperare i poveri servitori. Ora andiamo.⁹⁹
(my emphasis)

With these lines, the Marescalco succinctly presents the crux of his opposition, not only to marriage, but to being forced into it by the Duke. For him, the ducal decree is just another example of the authoritarianism that rules everyday life at court, a reflection of “strange whims” (*strani capricci*) of noblemen rather than a measure undertaken for his benefit. While his comparison of rulers to women (“*eglino sono come le donne*”) still reflects a general misogyny in its criticism of the inherent volubility of the female sex (which the Marescalco accuses the *Signori* of having

⁹⁸ Marrapodi, “The Aretinean Intertext and the Heterodoxy of the *Taming of the Shrew*,” 236. Cfr. Nino Borsellino, *Rozzi e Intronati: Esperienze e forme di teatro dal ‘Decameron’ al ‘Candelaio’* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974), 72.

⁹⁹ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.3. (“You don’t believe that his Excellency will make you rich?” / “I believe in God, and these rulers have strange whims. The things they do, it’s really something. If I wanted a wife, and even provided the dowry myself, and asked for his approval a thousand ways and with a hundred thousand petitions, I’d never have her — and because I don’t want her, he wants to give her to me by force. *They’re just like women*, who run after those who avoid them and avoid those who chase them. Their only pleasure is driving their poor servants to despair. Now let’s go.”)

adopted to their advantage), the Marescalco's distillation of the issue at hand reveals that his dissent is rooted in his desire for complete autonomy, rather than a manifestation his hatred of women. At the same time, the Marescalco's words here underscore the irrational and contrarian nature of the two institutions he opposes: marriage and tyrannical rule, both of which are encapsulated within the figure of the Duke, whose invisible hand controls the lives of those "poveri servitori." The comparison linking changeable women to capricious rulers thus underscores the comedy's critique of these institutions and emphasizes the subversive power of the Marescalco's resistance.

Aretino's Theater of Dissent

By way of conclusion, I would now like to turn my attention more fully to the concept of dissent in the comedy and its connection to the theme of remedy that forms the principal thread of this dissertation. In truth, the predicament of an unhappy marriage was not all that unusual for Renaissance society. Arranged marriages were the rule, rather than the exception, and the betrothed (both the man and the woman) typically had no say as to who their spouse would be or whether they would marry at all.¹⁰⁰ Thus when the Marescalco despairs to Ambrogio in II.5 that there is nothing to be done but 'put up with it or die' ("bisogna stare o morire"), he is, in a sense, voicing the reality of an entire culture. Numerous humanistic works further attest to the prevalence of this domestic problem, seen especially in the didactic subgenres of the dialogue or conduct literature. While we have already examined several examples from the male perspective, there exists other literary examples of women's own problem-solving, speaking to Ambrogio's own

¹⁰⁰ For more on the social history of marriage practices in Renaissance Italy, I would again direct the reader to the work of Christiane Klapsich-Zuber in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*.

assessment in II.5 that for every problem, there is a remedy to be found (“A ogni cosa è rimedio”).¹⁰¹

Let us look at a brief example from Alessandro Piccolomini’s comic dialogue, *La Raffaella* (1539), in which the “go-between” Raffaella counsels a young and beautiful, though unhappily married, Margarita, on how to survive a miserable marriage.¹⁰² In *La Raffaella*, the young Margarita laments that the custom of arranged marriage is a wicked one (“cattiva usanza”), as it forces two potentially mismatched people into a life-long union. The elder Raffaella brushes her concerns aside by reminding Margarita of a quick and easy remedy (“rimedio prontissimo e congruo”)—that is, to find a lover who skillfully makes up for the unhappiness that one experiences with her husband (“con desterità ricompensi quel dispiacere che si ha col marito”).¹⁰³ When Margarita shows immediate concern for the sinful nature of such a solution, Raffaella explains that her desperation and resentment will only grow with time, which is the greatest sin of all:

Al fine entrarai in disperazione e in pentimento del tempo passato invano, che è il maggior peccato che si possa avere. Uh, figliuola mia, consideralo ora che sei a tempo! E ripara al maggior errore

¹⁰¹ Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.5.

¹⁰² See Alessandro Piccolomini, *La Raffaella, ovvero, Dialogo della bella creanza delle donne*, ed. Giancarlo Alfano (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2001). Though published after *Il Marescalco*, Piccolomini’s *Raffaella* is contemporaneous with Aretino’s dialogic works, the *Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia* (1534) and the *Dialogo nel quale la Nanna insegna alla Pippa* (1536), and the historical record tells us that the two authors were in fact well acquainted. Like Piccolomini, Aretino’s dialogues feature female interlocuters who also discuss the realities of womanhood (including the more scandalous aspects of female sexuality, such as the ‘arte’ of prostitution). Giancarlo Alfano also notes that it was on Piccolomini’s recommendation that Aretino was admitted into the short-lived Accademia degli Infiammati, which was founded in Padua in 1540 (Aretino joined in March of 1541); this historical note offers further evidence that the two writers engaged in an intellectual exchange that their dialogues seem to broadly suggest (Alfano, “Introduzione,” in Piccolomini, *La Raffaella*, 9-10). Laura Giannetti also examines Piccolomini’s dialogue in her chapter “The Playing of Matrimony,” in Giannetti, *Lelia’s Kiss*, 193-232.

¹⁰³ Piccolomini, *La Raffaella*, 108. Note the contrast between Raffaella’s advice and Ambrogio’s suggestion in *Il Marescalco* to just ‘hit her over the head’ (“A dargli di uno abrenuncio ne la testa”); Aretino, *Il Marescalco*, II.5.

con minore, e pensa che non vale poi il dire «pesca fu!».¹⁰⁴ (my emphasis)

My italics above emphasize the consequentialist ethics that inform Raffaella's advice to Margarita, to 'fix the greater error with a minor one,' and call to mind the logic espoused by Fra Timoteo in Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (discussed in Chapter 1), in which the friar attempts to persuade the young Lucrezia that going to bed with another man is not a sin, but rather an act of sacrifice to cure her alleged infertility ("Quanto all'atto, che sia peccato, questo è una favola, perché la volontà è quella che pecca, non el corpo; e la cagione del peccato è il dispiacere al marito, e voi li compiacete; pigliarne piacere, e voi ne avete dispiacere").¹⁰⁵ Like Margarita, Lucrezia is worried about committing such a sin, but Timoteo assures her that the sin of adultery is minor compared to the great joy it will bring her husband when she is 'cured' of her childlessness. We know, however, that Lucrezia is not truly infertile; her inability to become pregnant is really the result of her older husband's impotence, which underscores the fact of her own mismatch. In the face of their unfortunate circumstances, then, the logic of the 'minor sin' is ostensibly convincing for both Lucrezia and Margarita, and thus the remedy for these two unhappily married women is found.

I bring these examples to the foreground to draw attention to the ways in which contemporary texts discussed the possible "remedies" to an unhappy marriage, particularly in the case of women. In medieval and early modern Italian society, women of the merchant and upper

¹⁰⁴ Piccolomini, *La Raffaella*, 109. "In the end, you'll become desperate and regret the time passed in vain, which is the greatest sin one can have. Oh, my daughter, consider it while you still can! And fix the greater error with a minor one and think that it could have been worse!" Editor Giancarlo Alfano notes that the expression "pesca fu" refers to the saying "manco male che non furon pesche," meaning "poteva finir peggio"; moreover, the proverb may be an allusion to sodomy, as it is in the case of Aretino's *Dialogo*, where "pesche" seems to allude to female anatomy ("Tu non puoi negare che il farti dar le pesche non ti sia piaciuto" in Aretino, *Dialogo della Nanna e della Pippa*, 404).

¹⁰⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *La Mandragola*, ed. Gian Mario Anselmi (Milan: Mursia, 1984), 3.11. References are to act and scene. "As for the act, that it might be a sin, this is a myth, because it is the will that sins, not the body; and the reason for the sin is displeasing your husband, and you'll be pleasing him; if you take pleasure in it, you'll be displeased about it."

classes, who lacked agency in a way that is not wholly dissimilar from the experience of the Marescalco at the court of Mantua, were typically forced into arranged marriages without their explicit consent. As the aforementioned historical and anthropological studies have illustrated, marriage was an institution that privileged the family's financial, political, and social interests over those of the individual, most especially if the individual in question was a woman. As the two examples demonstrate, 'remedies' to the problem of an unhappy marriage were commonly acknowledged and sometimes even explicitly condoned. In Italian literature, the motif dates back to Boccaccio's *Decameron* at the very least, and with Renaissance comedy's reliance on Boccaccian themes and plots, frequently finds its way into Renaissance comedy. Even in comedies where it is not the driving thread, some version of the adulterous spouse appears in nearly all the popular Cinquecento comedies.¹⁰⁶ What is interesting is, then, is the Marescalco's rejection of these possibilities and his intent in avoiding a similar fate. His remedy is another entirely: resisting the dominant forces of Renaissance court society in an effort to assert his right to self-determination.

Sixteenth-century comedies commonly drew inspiration from the Italian literary tradition, but it was in their theatrical staging and mixing with contemporary social realities that these comedies found particular resonance with their audiences. While the humanistic works of this period featured many of the same themes and moral questions, it was on the stage that these dilemmas truly came to life. By staging an act of dissent—in front of a court audience, no less—*Il Marescalco* enacts a poetics of resistance that provides one potential approach to the underlying

¹⁰⁶ I have discussed Machiavelli's *Mandragola* at length in this dissertation but would also point to Bibbiena's *La Calandria* as another prime example of an early sixteenth-century comedy that centers on the lustful extra-marital affairs of its characters. Aretino's *Cortigiana* also features a practical joke that involves the seducing of a married woman.

ethical, political, and social concerns of Italian Renaissance society.¹⁰⁷ In this light, the performance of the Marescalco's resistance on the stage becomes in itself a powerful act of resistance in the wider reality of the Renaissance court, thus rendering the former a kind of *mise-en-abyme* of dissent. When the Marescalco refuses to perform the role—of the acquiescent subject, of the dutiful man—that his socio-cultural surroundings have assigned him, Aretino's play becomes a symbol *and* an act of resistance—a double-level of resistance—through the linking of performance and action. By creating a spectacle of this resistance, Aretino calls public attention to the Marescalco's subjugation in order to assert the right to self-determination that Giovanni Pico della Mirandola so powerfully elucidated nearly fifty years earlier in his *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (*Oration on the Dignity of Man*), when God proclaims to Adam:

We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that you may, as the free and extraordinary shaper of yourself, fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer.¹⁰⁸

On the Renaissance stage, such acts of resistance question and subvert the very political and social orders that animate *Il Marescalco*'s plot. In this view, Aretino's spectacle of (double) dissent in *Il Marescalco* offers one positive vision for a future of individual liberty that the gutted Rome of his *Cortigiana* could not fathom. Taking a deep bow, locking arms together with his fellow

¹⁰⁷ Also informing my thoughts on this question are Judith Butler's arguments on the connection between performativity (and gender performativity in particular) and the ability of a subject to claim rights through social performance. In her 2009 essay, "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics," Butler writes, "What does it mean to lay claim to rights when one has none? It means to translate into the dominant language, not to ratify its power, but to expose and resist its daily violence, and to find the language through which to lay claim to rights to which one is not yet entitled." See Judith Butler, "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics," *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 4, n. 3 (2009): i-xiii (cit. x). The issues raised by *Il Marescalco* continue to find modern resonance, as reflected in the rhetorical question posed by twentieth-century philosopher Vaclav Havel: "Is it within the power of the 'dissidents'—as a category of subcitizen outside the power establishment—to have any influence at all on society and the social system? Can they actually change anything?" Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the state in central-eastern Europe*, ed. John Keane (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1985), 23.

¹⁰⁸ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man: a new translation and commentary*, eds. Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, and Massimo Riva (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 117.

Courtesan and humble Stablemaster, we can almost hear the itinerant Aretine announce, in an ironic reversal of Descartes' dictum: "I come forward, *unmasked*."

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have endeavored to demonstrate how Niccolò Machiavelli and Pietro Aretino advanced a poetics of remedy in their comedies. Beyond the sharp wit and clever satire, the originality of their works also lies in how their “comic cures” extend beyond the stage to impact the world around them. These remedies demonstrate the authors’ profound appreciation for the social, political, and historical causes and circumstances that conditioned life in the Renaissance, and they continue to inform us about the dominant forces of Italian culture and society during the sixteenth century. While these canonical authors and their canonical texts have been the subject of critical inquiry for many decades, if not centuries, it seemed to me that the question of how these plays sought to engage with certain publics had not been fully explored and thus would be a generative avenue of inquiry. Scholarly studies of the genre have sought to situate Cinquecento comedy in its proper context(s) and have contributed productively to our understanding of how comic theater incorporates and reflects these contexts in turn. Yet, during the early stages of this project, I found that even following the period of revived interest in Italian Renaissance theater beginning in the 1970s, there was an absence of scholarly interpretations that focused on how the comic theater of those early decades (1500-1535) sought to engage with its spectators, and how certain playwrights might have made use of this new medium for political and ideological purposes. I began to ask how their plays differed from the other comedies of the period—those by Ariosto and Bibbiena and Ruzzante—and arrived at the confluence of history and biography. My inquiry commenced with the earliest text by my chosen playwrights, Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*, and soon, I noticed an interesting motif arising from the play’s treatment of sickness and cure. It was the paradoxes of Machiavelli’s *rimedio*, the mandrake, and their accrual of meanings that led me to consider how comedy itself might function as a remedy, administered to the audience with

the hope of edifying and enlightening them to the dynamics of influence and action in sixteenth-century Italy.

More specifically, this study developed a thesis on how Machiavelli and Aretino envisioned the function of their comedies as “un argomento molto ristorativo,” to borrow a phrase from the 1525 prologue to *La Cortigiana*. The aim of these plays, then, was to create a productive forum for their ideas and perspectives on the world around them—for Machiavelli, Medicean Florence, and for Aretino, papal Rome and ducal Mantua. At a remove of five hundred years, it is difficult, perhaps even futile, to make claims about authorial intention, but I believe that these comedies reveal an appreciation of the power of theater as a catalyst for transformation. My selection of literary-dramatic texts has thus been motivated by common themes and biographical circumstances of the authors, but I have also strived to respect the unique contexts that underlie each comedy, whether geographical, historico-biographical, or political, and to let the texts speak for themselves. As a result of the humanist culture in which Machiavelli and Aretino participated, these plays also invite an intertextual approach, especially in regard to other works composed by these two prolific authors. It also inspired me to open a critical dialogue with other genres from this period, and to reach back through the canon of Italian literature to see how these authors were engaging with the literary tradition as part of their overall intellectual project.

This project was thus also informed by my study of the medieval literary tradition that is so essential to Italian cultural production. Giovanni Boccaccio’s influence on early modern Italian drama, by way of his *Decameron*, has been well documented in the scholarship and surfaces in my study of Machiavelli and Aretino’s theater. Yet I was surprised by the extent to which Dante’s *Commedia* emerges as a primary intertextual link in their comedies—though once I arrived at my thesis on the poetics of remedy—that is, that Machiavelli and Aretino endeavored to affect their

audiences and offer a solution to the maladies of their times through comic wit and satire—perhaps this is the connection that makes the most sense of all. Like Dante, Machiavelli and Aretino envisioned their writing as an instructive as well as a redemptive act. The comedies that I examined in this dissertation not only identify the problems of their era; they also interrogate the underlying social and ethical concerns and ultimately function as a remedy in and of themselves, administered to spectators in the hope of illuminating the path towards a new future.

In the course this project's development, I became interested not only in how Machiavelli and Aretino used certain language in their comedies, but also how their choice of form further shaped their function. In my early observations on *Mandragola*, I noted that the 'remedies' of the plot came to encompass not only the mandrake potion, but also the scheming undertaken by the other characters. Machiavelli's comedy, then, works to expand the semantic field of the word *rimedio*, reconfiguring it for political, ideological, and even comic purposes. I pursued this line of thinking to see how his later *Clizia* adopted similar strategies: in this comedy, laughter becomes to remedy, purging the foolish Nicomaco of his inappropriate passions. In Aretino's works, satire is the cure for the greed and corruption of power he witnessed in two of sixteenth-century Italy's most powerful courts, the papal court of Rome and the ducal court of Mantua. In the 1525 *La Cortigiana*, invective takes on a medical valence with the metaphorical purgation of vice from the ailing body politic of the Roman court. In Aretino's second comedy, *Il Marescalco*, the stage becomes a site of dissent, where acts of resistance question and subvert the socio-political order that animates the plot in order to propose a new vision of individual agency and freedom.

Furthermore, while it is virtually impossible to make an argument about the concrete influence that these plays had on their audiences—information on performance history and reception is often scant, and in the case of the 1525 *Cortigiana*, nonexistent, as it was never

performed—I have found that an analysis of the literary features of these playtexts (language, metaphors, character development, and other elements of the written text) nevertheless reveals a keen attention to a promoting the kind of collective perception that the theater engendered. These comedies were composed with a particular audience in mind while participating in the humanist exchange of ideas that defined the literary culture of the Renaissance. Indeed, Tatiana Korneeva, in her thorough and extensive study of Italian theater, its public(s), and the public sphere across two important centuries of development and expansion (1600-1800), reconstructs the relationship between playwright and spectator to posit a reciprocal dynamic that recasts theatre as an essential locus for the inception of a “political public sphere” and as a “vital catalyst for participatory spectatorship.”¹ Korneeva’s central argument revolves around the idea of a novel type of spectator, learned and critical, who arrived at the theater expecting to look but also to debate and adjudicate; a spectator whose opinions were not only valued but were intentionally cultivated by the playwright. Although Korneeva clearly delineates the chronological boundaries of her study, I have attempted to show across four chapters that, even in the earliest phase of the new modern Italian theater, playwrights such as Machiavelli and Aretino undertook similar efforts to engage their audiences through this emergent visual medium. My analysis of their dramaturgy highlights how these theatrical texts reflected the conditions in which they were produced, and how the playwrights incorporated their own perspectives and ideologies as part of their communicative project.

Thinking beyond the confines of the present study, Teodolinda Barolini’s 2009 essay on fresh avenues for Dante studies offers several productive suggestions. She writes, “The *Commedia*

¹ Tatiana Korneeva, *The Dramaturgy of the Spectator: Italian Theatre and the Public Sphere: 1600-1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 5.

has produced a prodigious amount of exegesis since the fourteenth century, and consequently one of our tasks is to direct and reassure the responsible young scholar who may think there is nothing left to say [...] My advice to the young Dante scholar is ‘only historicize.’”² I would argue that Barolini’s counsel is useful for anyone working on canonical texts from the pre-modern era of Italian literature. While I have attempted with this dissertation to incorporate a historicist approach in order to uncover original insights, I remain energized by the fact that “there is plenty left to say” (as Barolini asserts) about these authors and texts. One way to approach this work is to examine the material culture present in these and other works of theatrical comedy. The conversation around remedy (both literal and figurative) within these pages is a starting point that can open up stimulating opportunities for inquiry related to the history of medicine, understandings of the body, and epistemologies of the self. The discussions that animate the chapters of this dissertation also uncover other compelling themes, such as the conversation on the concepts of honor and shame in chapter 2, as well as the exploration of gender norms and socially transgressive behavior in chapter 4. Because these ideas played a powerful, even coercive, role in shaping Renaissance society, the representation of transgressions in comedy—such the rejection of normative values or gender roles, cross-dressing, and transgressive love—serves to both reify and interrogate these beliefs. Understanding the social and cultural function of shame allows modern scholars to better comprehend the underlying tensions and anxieties of Renaissance society while providing an opportunity to trace the ongoing negotiations relating to acts of transgression. Further analysis of these motifs, themes, and tropes as they appear in Renaissance comedy would allow us to reevaluate their impact in cultural discourse and reconsider the ways in which theater reflected *and*

² Teodolinda Barolini, “‘Only Historicize’: History, Material Culture (Food, Clothes, Books), and the Future of Dante Studies,” *Dante Studies* 127 (2009): 37.

shaped the worldview of its spectators. Much work remains for us in the field of Renaissance theater studies, and the possibilities are exciting.

The aim of this study has been to uncover new facets of the cultural poetics of Italian Renaissance drama, highlighting remedy as an ideologically imperative concept in the works of Niccolò Machiavelli and Pietro Aretino. As Machiavelli writes in the prologue to *Clizia*, “Sono trovate le commedie, per giovare e per dilettae alli spettatori [...] Ma, volendo dilettae, è necessario muovere gli spettatori a riso.”³ Comedy’s usefulness and ethical purpose cannot be decoupled from its ability to make us laugh, and therein lies the ingenuity of the cure.

³ Machiavelli, *Clizia*, prologue. (“Comedies exist to benefit and to please the audience [...] But if comedies are to give pleasure, they must incite the audience to laughter,” trans. Gilbert, 824).

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