Julia V. Ivanova

Machiavelli's Soteriology and the Humanist Quattrocento Dialogue

In order to reconstruct the genealogy of Niccolò Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, we will consider this work against the background of the Quattrocento dialogue and Renaissance novel, singling out common discursive elements and rhetorical strategies. In the first half of the fifteenth century, the authors of humanist experimental dialogues sought to prevent their readers from making the attempt at reading any univocal sense or unambiguous authorial intention into their texts. They made no straightforward claims, however, noting only *en passant* in the expositions to their dialogues that their sole aim was that of rhetorical exercise. This subterfuge made it possible to disguise the main topic of the dialogue – the rhetorical art – under the cloak of a quarrel around a definite concept or an entire theory (be it the poetry of *tre corone fiorentine*, or the virtues of laws and medicine, nobility, the true and false good, etc.).¹

The claim to combine objective reasoning with rhetorical exercise grants the participants of the dialogue an unprecedented discursive liberty – a liberty shared not only by the interlocutors, but by the author, too. Together with his characters, the author thus disclaims all responsibility for the utterances they make as the dialogue unfolds. The rules of the game are defined in the exposition: once the author has defined his work as (at least partly) a fiction, he acts beyond the reach of any appeals to objective reality and is subjected only to aesthetic judgment. The literary aspect, wearing the mask of objective reality, foments infinite exchange and inversion of opinions, life attitudes, and social roles (the early humanist writers often have their characters defend positions that contradict those to which they adhere in real life).

This strategy has the characters articulate scandalous and occasionally nonsensical things. One of the characters in Lorenzo Valla's *De vero falsoque bono*

1 For an analysis of the most famous fifteenth-century humanist dialogues, see David Marsh. *The Quattrocento Dialogue: Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Note: The research at the basis of this paper was conducted as part of the Basic Research Programme at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) and supported within the framework of a subsidy granted to the HSE by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Programme.

thus states that the true good consists, among other things, in cuckolding others (especially if the husbands are negligent in performing their conjugal duty) – the only condition is not to upset the betrayed husbands by revealing to them who they are.² The void nominal difference being removed, the thing itself (*res*) proves to be entirely identical: in both cases, be it a *connubium* or a *conjugium*, the woman either has sexual contact with a man (*cum uiro coniungitur*), or conceives a child with him, becoming a mother (*mater per maritum efficitur*). Both acts, as stated by Valla's character, who displays the "Epicurean" attitude, can be performed by a lover (*adulter*) with even greater success, given that he is a male (*mas*) no less, and perhaps even more so than the husband. We see here how the struggle against empty terms stumbles at a self-contradiction: having removed the difference between *connubium* and *conjugium* as a barely nominal difference, the "Epicurean" then equates the husband and the lover on the basis of their common denomination (*mas*). We may hypothesise that these semantic experiments are to be considered against the background of Valla's full-scale destruction of Aristotelian-Porphyrion taxonomical principles in his *Repastinatio dialecticae et philosophiae* (1439).³

Thanks to a whole system of mediations, we can see that each statement of the dialogue turns out to be, on the one hand, securely protected from literalism in interpretation, and, on the other, almost completely isolated from the particular historical situation in which it emerges. This system of mediations has been a constitutive trait of the dialogue genre since Plato (many of whose dialogues are staged as a retelling of quasi-real conversations, myths, speeches, etc.).⁴

What happens, then, to the meanings that emerge and develop as the dialogue unfolds? If the meaning of a concept is at stake (as a rule, Quattrocento

2 "Omnino nihil interest utrum cum marito coeat mulier, an cum amatore. Semoue nanque differentiam peruersi nominis connubij, unam eademque rem effecisti adulterij et conjugij. Etenim quid aliud est siue coniugium, siue connubium, siue matrimonium, nisi quod foemina uel cum uiro coniungitur, uel mater per maritum efficitur? Quæ duo etiam alius non maritus praestare foeminis potest. Maritus quod quid aliud quam marem significat? An non et adulter mas? Vide ne forte sit ipso interdum marito marior" (Lorenzo Valla. *De voluptate ac vero bono libri III*. Basel: Anreas Cartander, 1519, pp. 29–30).

3 On Valla's logical and semantic reform, see Salvatore Camporeale. "Lorenzo Valla. *Repastinatio, liber primus*: retorica e linguaggio." *Lorenzo Valla e l'Umanesimo Italiano*, edited by Ottavio Besomi and Mariangela Regoliosi. Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1986, pp. 217–239; Peter Mack. *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric, 1380–1620*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 22–73; Lodi Nauta. *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 13–128.

4 See the section "*L'ontologie comme chef-d'œuvre sophistique*" in Barbara Cassin. *L'Effet sophistique*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1995, pp. 23–65.

authors chose the verification of a concept as the subject matter for their dialogues), the dialogue is transformed into a sophistic game with a so-called meaning without denotation, that is, with a meaning which is not investigated, but arbitrarily assigned to the concept in question. Usually, the assignment of a given signification relies on the fact that some of the meanings the term has in ordinary language effectively enable the sophist to associate with it the required sense. But meaning does not exist in a void: the assignment of a meaning inevitably entails “the creation of a world,” in which the concept endowed with the required meaning is inscribed. Given that the humanists usually discussed anthropological and ethical notions, the worlds emerging in their dialogues are usually ethical, i.e. systems which enable a person to realise one of the possible ways of conduct. But ethics, by its very nature, may be the ethics of only one world – the real one; the freedom in producing different ethical worlds may only be that of dissociating from your own personality or of forging literary fictions. The fact that, at the dawn of the Renaissance, anthropology and ethics are transformed into a kind of an experimental field therefore merits special interest.

In the light of these preliminary remarks, let us now turn to *Mandragola*. In one of his articles, Ruf I. Khlodovsky traces the genealogy of the plot of Machiavelli's play, outlining its affinity to the third novel of the third day of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*.⁵ In fifteenth-century Latin humanist literature, we also find a story in which a cleric, using a simple confusion of terms, seduces a pious woman who ignores the fact that it is illicit to understand the desire to serve God metonymically (by giving oneself to one of His servants). This plot may be found, for instance, in Poggio Bracciolini. In his dialogue *Against Hypocrites*, one of the characters, Carlo Marsuppini, and Poggio himself retell a number of similar stories: a hermit from Pisa claimed that in being with a prostitute, he only seeks to exhaust his despicable body; another, being surprised during the act of coitus and harshly reprimanded, pretended that he had only wanted to bridle the mischievous flesh. Some hermits from Bologna, convincing a woman that the worthiest thing in the eyes of God is obedience, ordered her to go to bed and conceive a child, while one of the hermits consented to play the role of the husband – not for the pleasure of doing it, but for the sake of obedience and in order to give birth to a new being.⁶

⁵ Ruf I. Khlodovsky. “Lorenzo Medici mezhdru Giovanni Boccaccio i Niccolò Machiavelli: Transformatsiya odnogo novellisticheskogo syuzheta” [Lorenzo Medici between Giovanni Boccaccio and Niccolò Machavelli: The Transformation of a Novelistic Plot]. *Pyatnadtsatyy vek v evropeyskom literaturnom razviti*. Moscow: Nasledie, 2001, pp. 52–111.

⁶ Francesco Poggio Bracciolini. *Contro l'ipocrisia (i frati ipocriti)*, edited by Giulio Vallesse. Naples: Tullio Pironti, 1946, pp. 89–90.

It seems unnecessary to quote all the examples, given that there are a dozen of them in Poggio's dialogue. What matters is the logic the wicked clerics use in order to bolster their arguments. The depraved spirituals exploit the lack of an immediate logical transition from the corporeal to the spiritual. As a matter of fact, according to the Christian doctrine, this transition takes place in the historical world; it is exemplified by the Incarnation, in which matter is expiated, as the "lascivious body" is transformed into a "temple of the Holy Spirit." The body becomes immortal; it has been promised Resurrection. In the historical perspective, it cannot be dissociated from the spirit inhabiting it. Therefore the Law, given after the Incarnation, forbids and censors evil not only in deeds, but in thoughts as well. The spiritual sense cannot exist alone: it is given in the Revelation that operates in the history of mankind. But there is a gap in this logic, one which many heretics and enemies of Christianity have used: they ascribe to the Christians the most incredible acts of depravity, allegedly practiced under the cloak of spiritual love (cf., for example, the *Octavius* by Minucius Felix). The domain of the historical is self-contradictory: it is easy to skip the historical, passing from the body to the spirit. Being detached from history, the body loses its own right. By putting aside the aspect of the temporal embodiment of sense, one may introduce a kind of a selective semiotics, arbitrarily assigning meanings chosen at random to whatever bodily phenomenon one pleases. This is especially easy to do by paradiastolically misinterpreting the words of ordinary speech with neighboring significations, e.g., by identifying simple bodily love with the spiritual, or by drawing a parallel between the exhaustion of the body by erotic exercises to the ascetic *mortificatio carnis*.

Another dialogue in which we may find a story of a depraved cleric is Giovanni Pontano's *Charon*. A shade in Hell tells the infernal boatman a story about having dedicated her virginity to God, an act that was mediated by one of His servants. As a young girl, she attended church praying for a successful marriage, but the priest ordered her to remain unmarried and to dedicate herself to God. It turns out that this dedication is to be understood in very concrete, material terms: her virginity is dedicated to the church with which this priest is affiliated, and he also has the exclusive right to accept the offerings. The act of 'dedication' is described in detail: the priest proclaims the various limbs of the girl to be the property of the church. However, the ending of the novel is a sad one: the maiden falls pregnant and dies in labor.⁷

7 Giovanni Gioviano Pontano. *Opera omnia soluta oratione composita*, vol. 1. Venice: Aldus et Socerus, 1518, p. 64.

Both Poggio and Pontano used dialogues to exploit the topic of seduction of a woman by a cleric, though Poggio preferred the narrative form – that of the anecdote – for these erotic stories from the lives of the clergy, while Pontano was more inclined to the dramatic form. His novel consists almost entirely of the lines spoken by the priest and his innocent victim.

In general, if we were to sum up Pontano's role in the development of the Quattrocento dialogue, we should say that we owe to him the lending of the theatrical to the dialogue, its transformation into a series of comic scenes. Still, this sequence of scenes remains incomplete. The main omission is the absence of the intrigue which would unify the separate sketches. The binding element in Pontano's voluminous works is not intrigue but, as in classical dialogue, the unity of the topic. But the reasoning, a typical trait of the dialogue, progressively gives way in *Charon* to the demonstration: in front of a few stable characters, there files a procession of secondary figures, permitted only to utter short speeches – at best, to tell the audience a brief story.

In this way, the system of mediations that provides the author and the characters of the dialogue with the possibility of distancing themselves from the points of view expressed comes to a critical moment of its existence. From the very beginning, the utterances proffered in the fictitious conversation tend to merge with objective reality. The different meanings emerging in the conditions of the theatricalization of the dialogue undergo a process of emancipation, breaking free from the control of the author as well as of the characters who articulate them. Though the authors of the early Quattrocento dialogues insisted on the non-identity, even dissociation, between the images of their characters and their utterances within the framework of a fictitious conversation, here we see that the characters and their judgments merge. The characters, embodying particular ideas, enjoy the right to an independent way of conduct, displaying the idea that each of them transports. Acting in a definite way on stage, the characters relentlessly forge the illusion of the autonomy of their life. This autonomy is confined to the limits of the stage – a fictive space, fancying its own reality.

These are, according to our interpretation, the components of the historical-cultural situation in which such an enigmatic play as Machiavelli's *Mandragola* appears. The space in which its action unfolds is the last in this series of the objectification of ideas, whose spokesmen dared not assume responsibility for them. Its plot has been tested many times, by the novel on the one hand and the dialogue on the other; the dialogue made it possible to instill the logic of heretics and sophists into the play, the logic of arbitrariness, violently transgressing any actual reality and spinning its own illusory world from its transient phantoms. As Khlodovsky has convincingly demonstrated, *Mandragola*'s characters originate from the novel – a genre containing an irremediable contradiction.

From its very beginnings, this genre considered itself a fragmentary reflection of a particular event – and obviously a secular one. But at the same time, the memory of this genre also included elements drawn from spiritual literature – *exempla* of the church sermon and hagiographic episodes that necessarily presuppose miracles. An element of spontaneity, of unpredictability, is included in the very name of this genre. In this sense, its paradigm is the Gospel, a book containing ground-breaking good news; the Gospel and the central point of its poetics – the paradox, refuting and rejecting the narrow old logic and revealing to man the endlessness of his new, unprecedented possibilities: a paradox opening the way for human boldness.

Now we can, at least, put forward one of the, in my opinion, very probable interpretations of *Mandragola's* plot. There is a striking affinity between the plot of *Mandragola* and the evangelical story of the Annunciation.⁸ In both cases, the miraculous birth of a child is expected. Before the news of this child spreads, the characters languish in despair: Messer Nicia is lamenting the childlessness of Lucrezia, his wife, while Callimaco, haunted by love's passion, suffers the torments of Hell. Let us note that the characters, describing their situation and state of mind, speak suspiciously often of death. Of course, the story of a deceptive conception presented as a supernatural event had been exploited long before Machiavelli: it may be found as far back as the early Christian era, not only in apocrypha and various polemical writings hostile to Christianity, but indirectly in the New Testament as well: Saint Joseph “was minded to put her [his pregnant wife] away privily” (Matthew 1:19). The motif of procreation turns out to be connected with that of an alleged relocation of Messer Nicia and Lucrezia from their home to another place (which, however, does not take place – I.2; an allusion to the trip to Bethlehem for the Census).

Machiavelli goes further, linking the childless Lucrezia to John the Baptist's mother Elizabeth, who, according to the Gospel of Luke, was barren and yet miraculously enabled to conceive a child by her old husband. In the third act of *Mandragola*, Ligurio, who wants to put to the test the measure of Fra' Timoteo's

⁸ The fact that Machiavelli names his main character Lucrezia points to another theological allusion in *Mandragola*. At the beginning of *De Civitate Dei*, Saint Augustine scrutinizes in detail the problem of how Christian women, molested by wicked men, could preserve their chastity and holiness (I, chs. 18–19). Dealing with this question, Augustine also considers in the context of theological ethics the suicide of Lucretia, a Roman matron molested by the Roman king's son Sextus Tarquinius. There is no doubt that Machiavelli had read *De Civitate Dei*. On *Mandragola* as a rewriting of the circulating ‘Lucretia stories,’ see Melissa M. Matthes. *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics: Readings in Livy, Machiavelli, and Rousseau*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, pp. 51–98.

dishonesty, informs him of a fictitious pregnancy of a non-existent maiden, whom Fra' Timoteo would have to talk into taking the medicine that enables her to get rid of the unwanted child. This imaginary maiden is in the fifth month of pregnancy when Lucrezia is told of the future conception.

Besides the affinity of the plots, we may cite a long series of quotations that confirm the exalted condition of Machiavelli's Lucrezia and create, so to say, a *theotokic* context for the reception of her person. Besides the fact that word of Lucrezia's beauty and grace even reaches Paris – this may be considered simply as a commonplace of courtly literature –, there are a number of sayings testifying that neither Lucrezia nor the other characters perceive her eventual pregnancy as a result of natural causes. Messer Nicia, for instance, narrates at length that Lucrezia considers endless prayer the best means against infertility – devoting all of her time to it while paying no attention to the circumstances that might physically hinder conception: “she spends four hours on her knees with her Our Fathers before she'll go off to bed; and she's a tough one with the cold.”⁹ Callimaco speaks of “the most honest” nature of Lucrezia, “totally alien to love affairs.” Nicia characterises Lucrezia as the “the sweetest person in the world and the most obliging.”¹⁰ At the same time, Ligurio, also pointing to Lucrezia's virtuous nature, affirms that she is “fit to rule a kingdom.”¹¹ Lucrezia's own statements are also of some interest. When her mother proposes that she take the mandrake potion and give herself to a man, she says: “even if I was the last woman left in the world and if the human race was to rise again from me, I don't believe that I would be allowed to do something like this.”¹² Apropos, the motif of Lucrezia's pregnancy emerges at least twice. Fra Timoteo seeks to persuade Lucrezia by using the following example: “The Bible says that the daughters of Lot, thinking that they were the last women left in the world, lay with their father. And because their intention was good, they did not sin.”¹³ When

9 “[...] ma la sta quattro ore ginocchioni a infilzar paternostri, innanzi che la se ne vadi a letto, ad è una bestia a patire freddo” (I.6). – From here on, the Italian original is quoted from Niccolò Machiavelli. *Opere scelte*, edited by Gian Franco Berardi, 2nd edition. Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1973. The English translation is quoted from Niccolò Machiavelli. *Mandragola*, translated by Nerida Newbigin, 2009. http://www.personal.usyd.edu.au/~nnew4107/Texts/Sixteenth-century_Florence_files/Mandragola_Translation.pdf. Accessed 23 July 2018.

10 “Ell'era la più dolce persona del mondo e la più facile” (III.2).

11 “[...] bella donna, savia, costumata ed atta a governare un regno” (I.3).

12 “[...] ché io non crederei, se io fussi sola rimasa al mondo, e da me avessi a resurgere l'umana natura, che mi fussi simile partito concesso” (III.10).

13 “Dice la Bibbia che le figliuole di Lotto, credendosi essere rimase sole nel mondo, usorono con el padre; e, perché la loro intenzione fu buona, non peccarono” (III.11).

Fra Timoteo tells Lucrezia what she has to do, she replies: “[...] of all the things discussed, this seems to me the strangest.”¹⁴ The characters who change their clothes for the feigned hunt for a lover for Lucrezia use as a password the words “saint cuckold” – an obvious allusion to Saint Joseph. And finally, again, Lucrezia’s words, transmitted by Callimaco, that she pronounced after the adulterous night: “I will judge that it is the result of a heavenly disposition that so desires, and I am not capable of refusing what heaven wants me to accept. Therefore I take you as lord, master, guide. I want you as my father, my defender, and as my dearest good”¹⁵ (cf. the Holy Virgin’s canticle: “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour”). After the night with Lucrezia, Callimaco says: “As a result, I find myself the happiest, most contented man ever in the world; and if death and time do not bring this happiness to an end, I’ll be more blessed than the blest, more sainted than the saints.”¹⁶ Another Biblical context that the author implicitly refers to is the Book of Tobit. The evil demon Asmodeus falls in love with Sarah, Raguel’s only child, and kills every man she attempts to marry. In the play, this context is introduced by mentioning of the name of the Archangel Raphael (according to the Holy Writ, it was he who delivered the maiden from the demon). Fra’ Timoteo, blessing Lucrezia’s union with Callimaco, says that he will recite the Archangel Raphael’s prayer (this prayer forms part of the order of a Catholic wedding mass). The Middle Ages knew the demon Asmodeus as King Solomon’s rival, who had once managed to assume the king’s form and take power over his harem for a short period of time. Significantly, Asmodeus was unmasked thanks to the testimonies of Solomon’s wives, outraged and surprised by the fact that their husband, who had previously been a jealous enthusiast of the Law, had suddenly given up on the rules of conduct with women and began indulging in debauchery and excess. In this context, it is worth recalling the words of the song Callimaco was singing shortly before his date with Lucrezia: “Since you won’t let me come to your bed,/may the devil come instead!”¹⁷ It is worth noticing that the coitus of a chaste and virtuous woman with a demon (with Asmodeus, as a rule), and the resultant conception of a child, was a wide-spread topic by Machiavelli’s time.

14 “[...] ma questa mi pare la più strana cosa che mai si udissi” (III.11).

15 “[...] io voglio iudicare che è 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, padrone, guida; tu mio padre, tu mio difensore, e tu voglio che sia ogni mio bene [...]” (V.4).

16 “Tanto che io mi trovo el più felice e contento uomo che fussi mai nel mondo; e se questa felicità non mi mancassi o per morte o per tempo, io sarei più beato ch’è beati, più santo che e’ santi” (ibid.).

17 “Venir vi possa el diavolo al letto. / Da poi che io non ci posso venire io!” (IV.9).

The intertwining of the stories taken from the Book of Tobit and the Gospel, and the transformation of the ideas they contain through the means of the novel and the dialogue, enabled the author to create a rich context for the total refutation of the New Testament's evangelic message. It is not by chance that *Mandragola* is filled with words and expressions connected with salvific good news. The recognition – a customary device for any comedy – is preceded by agonizing suspense and takes place when the characters are already on the verge of desperation, at the crossroads between life and death. Machiavelli's main characters – Callimaco, Messer Nicia, and Lucrezia – from time to time threaten to die – until, that is, the coitus between Lucrezia and Callimaco occurs. On the verge of and immediately after this event, they acknowledge that they have experienced a second birth. When Ligurio informs Messer Nicia that Fra' Timoteo has agreed to induce Lucrezia into committing adultery, he exclaims:

Nicia: You've given me new life. Will it be a boy?

Ligurio: A boy.¹⁸

Lucrezia's husband assures her that after having committed the act she seems completely renewed: "because this morning it is just as if you were reborn."¹⁹ He notices in her the signs of audacity, when she had formerly always been meek: "You're very bold this morning. Yesterday evening she seemed half dead."²⁰

We must mention yet another event binding these two contexts – the *theotokic* and the "Lucrezian": the celebration of the wedding of Lucrezia Borgia and Alfonso I d'Este in Ferrara at the beginning of 1502, marked by a theatrical performance based on the story of the Annunciation. Kristin Phillips-Court quotes a fragment from the description of this event made by Isabella d'Este in 1503 and observes that, according to this description of the performance, the scenography of the Ferrara Annunciation turns out to be quite similar to the composition of Piero della Francesca's 1455 Annunciation panel.²¹ Phillips-Court's research is not dedicated to the biography of Alexander VI's legendary daughter, however, but to the fifteenth-century *sacre rappresentazioni*, and the main character in her work is Feo Belcari with his famous *Rappresentazione quando la Nostra Donna*

¹⁸ "Nicia: Tu mi ricrei tutto quanto. Fia egli maschio? - Ligurio: Maschio" (III.8).

¹⁹ "[...] perché gli è proprio, stamane, come se tu rinascessi" (V.5).

²⁰ "Tu se' stamani molto ardita! Ella pareva iersera mezza morta" (ibid.).

²¹ Kristin Phillips-Court. "Framing the Miracle in Feo Belcari's 'Rappresentazione quando la Nostra Donna Vergine Maria fu annunziata dall'Angelo Gabriello'." *Annali d'Italianistica* 25 (2007), pp. 233–261, p. 233.

Vergine Maria fu annunziata dall'Angelo Gabriello. In the Middle Ages, the feast of the Annunciation played a particular role in the life of Florence and other cities of Tuscany: the New Year began on this day, and it was only in November 1749 that this was moved to 1 January by decree of Duke Francis II of Lorraine. In the Quattrocento, the celebrations of the Annunciation in Florence were particularly magnificent and ingenious. As Phillips-Court writes in her article:

In addition to feast day celebrations organised by convents and confraternities, the plays richly flourished under Lorenzo de' Medici during the last decades of the fifteenth century. Nuptial and diplomatic celebrations alike included elaborate productions of the sacred representations in churches, performed mainly by confraternities and religious companies, but sometimes also by professional actors, courtiers and poets.²²

Perhaps it was these numerous Florentine sacred representations of the Annunciation, often used by the politicians who organized them to impose appropriate political views on their audience, that instilled in Machiavelli the idea of carnivalizing the Gospel story.²³ It is also probable that Machiavelli, who demonstrated a lively interest in the history of the Borgia family, was aware of the fact that the representation of the Annunciation had formed part of the luxuriant feasts on the occasion of Lucrezia's wedding. In the first years of the sixteenth century, Lucrezia's reputation was already somewhat ambiguous: on the one hand, it had been tainted by participation in her father's and brother's intrigues – it remaining unclear how far this was intentional or not; and on the other, the most famous politicians and writers of her time, who had maintained friendly relations with her (the very pious Aldo Manuzio featuring among them), characterized her as a highly intelligent, pious, and modest woman.²⁴ Her husband, Alfonso d'Este, officially delegated the administration of the duchy to her during his absence from Ferrara. (Perhaps this fact explains the characteristic of Machiavelli's Lucre-

²² Ibid., p. 237.

²³ Still, we must mention here the interpretation of *Mandragola* as a parody on another Christian plot, a *missa parodia* inverting the order of the Catholic Mass and deriding the transubstantiation – cf. Paolo Dall'Olio. *Alcune note sull'interpretazione della Mandragola di Niccolò Machiavelli*. http://www.bibliomanie.it/interpretazione_mandragola_machiavelli_paolo_dallolio.htm. Accessed 23 July 2018.

²⁴ Agostino Paravicini Bagliani quotes some extracts from the reports addressed to Alfonso d'Este by one of the Ferrara ambassadors: "Lucrezia è donna molto prudente, discreta e di buona indole [...] è ad un tempo modesta, bella e onesta"; "Nulla di sinistro si debba o si possa sospettare di lei." Cf. Agostino Paravicini Bagliani. "Lucrezia Borgia preghiere e veleni." *La Repubblica*, 10 August 2007. <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2007/08/10/lucrezia-borgia-preghiere-veleni.html>. Accessed 23 July 2018.

zia as “atta a governare un regno”?) A special line of research exists that investigates the connection between two Lucrezias – Borgia’s daughter and Machiavelli’s character. The ambiguous reputation of the name “Lucrezia” (“from Lucretia Romana²⁵ to Lucrezia Borgia and famous Lucrezias – Cinquecento courtesans”) in sixteenth-century Italian culture has been examined by Giusi Baldissone.²⁶ In fact, the affinity between the two Lucrezias, separated by two millennia, is quite striking, at least if we proceed from the image of Lucrezia elaborated in the secondary literature of recent decades – as a reasonable, virtuous, pious, and refined being forced to serve the vile intentions of the men who had power over her.²⁷ Viewed in this way, Lucrezia Borgia is transformed into a symbol of the Machiavellian period and of the Machiavellian understanding of political wisdom, appropriate to his time – perhaps, no less than Lucrezia in *Mandragola*, in her interpretation by Luigi Russo: “una vera eroina della moralità ‘Machiavelliana.’”²⁸

In this way, these repetitive acts of parodying Scripture – i.e. the progressive plunge into the abyss of sin – take the form of the good news of the revival of life. Trampling and inverting the Gospel and the Law becomes a means of gaining this renewed existence. It seems very important that the spectator of the play

25 An allusion to Livy’s account of Collatinus’ virtuous wife may be found in *Mandragola*, I.1. Like Tarquinius, Callimaco learns about the woman he will come to desire during a friendly conversation at a party. As in Livy, *Mandragola* mentions a competition regarding the superiority of women. (The Romans compare their own wives, while Callimaco and his friends compare French and Italian women [Tit. Liv., *Ab urbe cond.*, I.57].) Just as in *Ab urbe condita*, the hero-lover in *Mandragola* is far away from his beloved when the desire to possess her awakens in his soul, and this desire prompts him to undertake a trip. Finally, Collatinus’ wife attracts Sextus Tarquinius by her virtue no less than by her beauty (“Ibi Sex. Tarquinius mala libido Lucretiae per vim stuprandae capit; cum forma tum spectata castitas incitat” – I.57.10); Callimaco likewise says: “First of all, what’s most against me is her character: she is completely virtuous and quite against anything that has to do with love” (“in prima mi fa guerra la natura di lei, che è onestissima ed al tutto aliena dalle cose d’amore” – *Mandragola*, I.1). Both Lucretias – Livy’s and Machiavelli’s – are not fond of entertainments or paying visits to friends; both make their servants work hard and live a virtuous life.

26 Baldissone points out the contrasting contexts in which this name functioned: Perugino depicts a Roman matron with jewelry which had once belonged to Lucrezia Borgia; the Cinquecento courtesans willingly used this name as a pseudonym. Aretino, for example, names one of the characters of his obscene work “Lucrezia.” Cf. Giusi Baldissone. “Un nome contaminato: Lucrezia nella *Mandragola*.” *Il nome nel testo: Rivista internazionale di onomastica letteraria X* (2008). *Atti del Convegno internazionale di Onomastica & Letteratura. Università degli studi di Pisa, 31 maggio – 1 giugno 2007*, pp. 27–38. <http://riviste.edizioniets.com/innt/index.php/innt/article/view/278>. Accessed 23 July 2018.

27 Cf., e.g., the works by Agostino Paravicini Bagliani and Bruno Capaci.

28 Luigi Russo. *Machiavelli*. Rome: Laterza, 1974.

remains unaware whether the coitus of Lucrezia and Callimaco has resulted in conception, or whether this conception turns out to be a fiction – as is the case with the other pregnancy mentioned in the play. In fact, we see here a continuation of the logic of the wicked clerics from Boccaccio's *Decameron* on the one hand, and on the other that of the Quattrocento humanists, who systematically evaded responsibility for their own utterances and sought to create a variety of semantic worlds, revolving around the most incredible versions of ethical relativism and inconceivable without the possibility of declaring them non-existent, of dispelling them at any moment as a nightmare. Machiavelli's play, inheriting the plots of the novel and of the dialogue, could not help but inherit the logic born and elaborated within these genres.

Let us note that our interpretation of *Mandragola* as an inversion of the Gospel in no way contradicts the conception according to which this comedy constitutes a political allegory in which Lucretia symbolically represents Florence and the Florentine people. Rather, these two notions fit each other perfectly. It is not by chance that, in the prologue, the author expresses a wish regarding his Florentine audience: "I would wish that you,/just as she was, might be deceived too ("[...] ed io vorrei/Che voi fussi ingannate come lei"), while other characters assume the roles of the politicians in whose hands the destiny of the city lies.²⁹

In conclusion, we should stress that we have so far discussed exclusively the inversion of the Gospel in *Mandragola*, and not its parodying. These two concepts are entirely different. If we were to deal with the parodying of the Gospel – which would be a very fruitful topic to examine – it would require investigating the carnivalesque aspect of Machiavelli's play, and in this light the very concept of death acquires a radically new sense: it is clear that, in the world of the Carnival, death occupies a completely different place than in the phantasmatic worlds generated in sophistic games.

²⁹ Cf. Carnes Lord. "On Machiavelli's *Mandragola*." *The Journal of Politics* 41 (1979), pp. 806–827. Lucrezia, in the author's opinion, represents the Florentine people, who become the playthings of the city's rulers: Messer Nicia is Piero Soderini (even Roberto Ridolfi, while not accepting the allegoric interpretation of the play, recognizes his affinity to Machiavelli); Fra Timoteo, stingy and greedy, is Pope Julius II; Sostrata, Lucretia's mother, participating in the plot against Lucretia's chastity, is Francesco Soderini, Piero's brother, a rich and ambitious cleric who became a cardinal in 1503 under Julius II and was the Florentine ambassador at the Papal Curia in 1504. In Machiavelli himself, Lord sees a similarity with Ligurio, who, as is typical for a smart servant, is the moving principle of the whole intrigue. Callimaco, who at the end of the play happily takes possession of Lucretia, is the future prince, young and audacious, who is able to save Florence. In his article, the author also cites the works of his opponents, who refuse to see any topical political content in *Mandragola* at all.