Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* and the Emerging *Animateur*¹

The notion is commonplace that the writers of erudite comedy in Italy in the sixteenth century based their art on the traditions inherited from the New Comedy of Plautus and Terence. Roman theatre virtually dictated, not only the conventions of dramatic art, but subject matter, stock characterizations and the sense of dramatic structure which enabled the playwright to take a typical situation, develop it along given lines of causation, theme and motivation to a representative and satisfying dénouement. The ancients showed the renaissance writers how to create plays.¹ Yet from the outset, the sixteenth-century imitations made room for the use of a colourful vernacular, the depiction of contemporary settings and the representation of local mores. Not only was there a desire for greater realism in the detail, but there was also a search for novelty within the framework of the tradition. The sixteenth-century writers were in competition with the ancients, indeed bent on surpassing them, in the creation of witty, complex and racey intrigues. Their’s was, above all, a comedy of plot designed to entertain and to create wonder. As Salingar states: in these plays “the marvellous is just as important as the probable, and an extra dimension in a play is the writer’s skill in reconciling both.”² It is the manipulation of events which gave the first line of pleasure, and to the end of developing these witty situations, the playwrights ransacked, not only the ancients for comic situations allowing for new combinations and doublings, but also the novella which provided a rich repertoire of tricks and vignettes.³

The mechanics employed for creating and resolving those comic situations was part of the heritage. The ancients met the challenge of manipulating a group of characters through a series of encounters, unified through a relation of entailment in syntagmatic patterns from an opening stasis to a new equilibrium at the end of the action through an animateur figure, drawn, to be sure, from a character represented in Roman society, but conventionalized for the purposes of the drama. Their invariable choice was the slave

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— witty, mildly insubordinate in word but loyal in deed, motivated by a sense of duty and perhaps, implicitly, by a hope for reward, by fear of punishment or by scorn for the old master. Typically he was attached to a young master who was helplessly in love and unable to regulate his affairs. The slave is called upon to devise schemes for winning the lady and for tricking the obstructing character. He was employed for running errands, eavesdropping and generally engineering a social intrigue which could lead the lovers to union and the comedy to a festive conclusion. The desired speed and economy of plot, the love for ironic situation and fortuitous encounter, the polished structural gameplaying which these comedies proffered, necessitated the offices of a prime mover participating in the action itself. The slave as a “low” social figure remained quite naturally an “outsider” to the society, uninvolved in the major issues of the play, an accessory figure who operated by principles of wit and necessity rather than by moral criteria, so that once the goals were achieved which involved a measure of deception and trickery, the slave could be, in a sense, banished, at least psychologically, and the lovers could enjoy their triumph in innocence. If questions of censure arose, the trickster’s means were generally exonerated by the desirability of the ends he achieved. As an intriguer he was central to the play, but his nature and interests as a social creature figured only marginally.

Comic playwrights in the sixteenth century took the art form with its intricate plotting, themes of love and trickery and accommodated it to Italian society. The animateur figure remained the central mover in plots of increasing complexity. But the identity and behaviour of the intriguer was bound to evolve in keeping, not only with emerging plot types, but with the necessity for placing him in the context of contemporary city life. As a character type, he underwent a remarkable process of adaptation: his roles were more diversified; his character became more motivated, less anonymous; his repertoire of burle and beffe was increased. The emancipation of the trickster in the commedia erudita was essential to the emergence of this comic genre; it was one of the foundational steps in the development of the trickster comedy of the renaissance which came to perfection in the plays of Ben Jonson a century later.

It is not my purpose in choosing Machiavelli’s Mandragola as an illustration of the emerging animateur figure to suggest that it was the first play to offer alterations to the type, or that it is necessarily the best or generally the most representative trickster play
from the period. I have chosen it because it is perhaps the best known play from the early sixteenth century, and because with regard to the trickster type it is something of a problem play, illustrating certain ambiguities which have arisen with trickster plotting and trickster types in general, accounting for some of the contradictory readings of this play and others like it. Briefly stated, the more the ethos of the comic society and the resolution of the comic action are determined by the personality and will of the demi-urge figure operating within the play, the more the significance and social purpose of that work must be understood in terms of the nature and capabilities of that character as the instigator of the play’s intrigue. Inversely, as the intricacies and nuances of the comic society depend increasingly upon that central guiding personality, the more complicated and ambiguous his personality becomes. The problems of interpretation of such plays arise from the relationship between the plot as a symbolic form, (the will and purpose of the animateur as the creator of that plot), and the purpose of the author in relation both to his structure and to his persona.

The Mandragola looks deceptively simple. We are told that it has been offered for our delight, and that it is about “a lover wan, a lawyer none too bright, / A wicked friar, a scheming parasite” (Prologue), a proposition so simple that, in fact, we do not really believe the prologue to be anything more than an iteration of conventional formulae. That it is a “light and frivolous” thing we will hardly accept from an intelligence of Machiavelli’s magnitude, a presupposition which has led several critics into such quagmires as comedy and political philosophy or comedy and historical allegory. The integrity of the comic form and the force of the comic catharsis, in fact, militate against applied readings of the play. There is an ineluctable sense that in the comic design we have not only what the play is, but what it signifies in terms of experience and understanding.

The “wan lover” is Callimaco, a student in Paris who, in the context of a discussion over the relative beauty of French and Italian women decides, on an irrational impulse which turns into love-longing of the most clichéd sort, to return to Florence to see a woman who is celebrated by one of her relatives as the true sans pareil among women. He wants to seduce the lady, Lucrezia Calfucci, but she is married, pious to a fault, and faithful to her foolish husband, the “lawyer none too bright.” The entire play is a kind of silly wager. Can Callimaco overcome these insuperable odds? We know he will, since the comic rights of love, nature,
youth and a little wit are on his side. If we do not want it to happen, we have seen enough of this in Boccaccio to know to leave now. But we stay to see how man’s wits will employ themselves, since wit alone in these matters is the love party’s stock-in-trade and, in the end, the recognized and justified means for earning the reward. The medieval courtier’s suffering and silent pining, or his valourous feats of service have been replaced by witty social machinations which, nevertheless, still constitute a process of trial, a rite of passage leading to the prize. These machinations are carried out by a substitute figure, the prankster-intriguer. Because he acts for money rather than love, and because he is the actual rogue whose brain devises the tromperie, somehow he can also be blamed, if necessary, taking upon himself any opprobrium for the deeds. In the Mandragola, a long and complex practical joke takes place implicating the aberrant impulses of characters and audience alike.

That rogue is one Ligurio, no longer a slave attached to a master, no longer confined to the limited decorum appropriate to a slave, or his sixteenth-century equivalent, the valet, but rather he is a “freeloader” acquaintance of the lady’s husband, Messer Nicia, and a one-time marriage broker. By implication he knows all the tricks of that particular trade. In this characterization Machiavelli has not only adjusted the figure to fit contemporary Florentine society, but he has created a new trickster type, given him greater social freedom, a wider range of behaviour, more distinct personal motivation. He is a freelance parasite tending towards the confidence man. He dogs Messer Nicia for small handouts in exchange for playing “yes man” to him. But for a financial consideration he is ready to betray his host — though as a true parasite he is careful not to harm him mentally or physically in any way. That Ligurio is a modified parasite figure is closely related to the outcome of the play; his logic as an accomplice is to aid the cause of love as usual, as a parasite to maintain deceptions at the end in order to preserve his host and the future material gains he anticipates from him.

Ligurio’s independence as an agent is called to attention by Siro’s instinctual distrust of him. If he is ready to betray his friend, Messer Nicia, in promising access to Lucrezia, would he not also betray Callimaco were it in his interests to do so? Callimaco characterizes Ligurio as a man who lives by deception. Ligurio replies that he is as eager to get for Callimaco what he wants as Callimaco is to get it for himself, all rewards aside. No further explanation is offered, but the idea is planted in our
minds that for personal reasons Ligurio wants Messer Nicia cuckolded and Lucrezia seduced. There are intimations of motivation which are personal and direct. Such a character is a qualified architect for a seduction scheme that calls for a charlatan doctor, a love potion with astonishing side effects, the conversion of a mother into a bawd, a friar into a pander and a husband into one of the most extraordinary, yet unwitting, pimps comedy has produced. That the confidence game is outrageously transparent is commensurate with Messer Nicia's visible credulousness and gullibility. Lucrezia, for all her piety, is swayed to submit to the plot, in spite of the fact that an innocent man will die as a result. She offers a prolonged spectacle of hollow protest, safe in the knowledge that all responsibility will rest with her mother and her confessor. Her case is merely further conventional confirmation that if it lies in women's interests, no matter how principled, they "will let themselves be led — as long as you do it with soft words," a message repeated about women by dozens of comic *entremetteuses* in plays to follow. In the final analysis Ligurio has an easy time of it, once his strategy is in place. No threats of resistance come his way; one could almost wish they had to see him put more to his mettle the way later tricksters were. But Machiavelli has already made remarkable progress in diversifying and strengthening the role. Ligurio is attached to Florentine society, is freer, more highly motivated, capable of more elaborate intrigues, yet he remains, as the trickster generally must, an amoral outsider, cynical, pragmatic, cool and, as Radcliff-Umstead stated, "ruthlessly efficient." Ligurio possesses elements of his archetypal trickster ancestors, but Machiavelli supplies him with new masks and a new identity to fit the times. The *Mandragola*, in this adaptation of the trickster, sets the way for new manifestations of the type in the erudite comedy to follow.

The problem comedy aspect of this particular play arises when the trickster participation is evaluated in light of the symbolic social situation he has, in a sense, created at the end of the play. The *Mandragola* is a perplexing play in that it can be seen both as a harsh statement of human depravity and as a quasi-romantic caper involving a young lover, an "eligible" married woman and a silly old husband. Machiavelli does not alert us to his moral intentions in the play as so many others do in their prologues, but alludes to feelings of rancor and contempt, and to the incapacity of others to make him "hold his tongue"; "this man is malicious too," we are told in the Prologue, a malice for which he is famous throughout Italy. Such a statement alerts the reader to the degree
of moral indignation the play may contain. Subsequent trickster oriented drama, beginning with the plays of Aretino, was to contain a rich array of spitting critics and railers whose orientation to the world was satiric. Trickster, in a host of guises, was to become the author's agent in the play, designed both to sermonize and to manipulate events so that the pretentious fools, gulls and boobies came to their just rewards in the form of exposure, monetary losses, physical abuse or social banishment. This was a world view Machiavelli was in every way capable of. In a letter to Guicciardini he spoke in just such sardonic tones, saying how he would play the scourge to Florence. How better, he reasons, than to allow them to indulge their own follies until such excesses become their own punishment.\(^{13}\) When the preacher turns comic manipulator, he so arranges events that cupidity, lust, all manner of follies, are ridiculed and their exponents humiliated, if not in their own eyes, in the eyes of the spectators.

In the Mandragola Machiavelli appears to go some distance in creating that kind of play.\(^{14}\) Ligurio shadows Messer Nicia, setting him up with leading questions to expose his silliness. He asks him if he saw the sea while he was at Leghorn and how much bigger it was than the Arno. "Than the Arno?" replies Messer Nicia, "It's four times — more than six — I'd even go so far as to say more than seven times as big; you can't see a thing but water, water, water." (Act I) There can be no doubt in this that Messer Nicia is a ninny — mentally a mere child.\(^{15}\) Ligurio even goes beyond the call of practical events to play gratuitous pranks on Messer Nicia, giving him bitter aloes to put in his mouth instead of wax, tricks arising perhaps from a profound disliking, or simply from an opportunity to pull off a gag on an ass who should have known better. But there is little at stake in this; Messer Nicia's follies present an insignificant target for the satirist's diatribe.

The satiric themes deepen with the anti-clerical overtones of the play. When Fra Timoteo agrees to arrange for an abortion for Camillo Calfucci's daughter in exchange for a substantial donation, Ligurio comments ironically, "Now I see that you are the truly religious man I took you for." But there is little original insight in this, given the long tradition of anti-clerical humour and the clichéd participation of monks and friars in stories of shady dealings and deceptions. "These friars are sly and cunning; and that is only to be expected, for they know all about our sins as well as their own" (Act III). This is a complex observation, but its spirit is not acerbic in itself. Ligurio believes himself in every way
superior to Fra Timoteo and proves it in his deceptions; he alone knows how "to handle the business of the world" (Act III). In spite of the patterns, it is not easy to identify major satiric themes expressly stated in the Mandragola.

It is the larger patterns of knavery and human depravity implicit in the play which provide the most telling evidence for seeing the play as an indictment of vice. Machiavelli experiments with an apparatus for deception which had a long and brilliant future in the satiric comedy of knaves and their gulls. The trickster element is diversified by Ligurio who, as arch-rogue, enlists Callimaco and Fra Timoteo as his accomplices in a kind of miniature confidence game operation. Callimaco is set up momentarily as the magus figure, the practitioner of arcane sciences couched in a Latin calculated to impress the ignorant. Messer Nicia is such an easy convert that the ruse does not require much sophistication. The friar is included to form a triumvirate of knaves; his commission is to work through the authority of the church to confuse Lucrezia's reasoning and to gain her compliance in the plot. But unlike the well-known London rogues of Jonson's comedy, their practice is not generalized, and the author's purpose is not to expose man's cupidity and egoism on a large scale. The sole prize is a night's pleasure, so that the use of occult lore to dupe others is scaled down to a single prank. In a general way the Mandragola, as a satiric comedy, is predetermined to plant the cuckold's horns on the shallow pedant. But the most crucial element is missing: comic exposure. Satire is an art form of punishment. Yet, at the play's conclusion, only the rewards are counted and celebrated; Messer Nicia is kept in ignorance, and in a cynically comic way, the hoax is slated to continue with the subsequent meeting of the lovers. Thus, satire is not paramount in the structure. If the play is to be looked upon as a statement of depraved human nature, the evidence must be indirect: that Ligurio is an arch-tempter, that all the others who fall for his devices are damned for their collusion and that the maintenance of the deception at the play's end is an ultimately cynical solution to the action.

The ambiguity arises with the trickster figure himself who, with his superior knowledge, his insights into those he manipulates, his control of the action and consequently of the comic rewards and punishments administered through that action, imposes the moral order upon the play. It is an ambiguous order. The playwright is not likely to resist offering ironic asides by the rascal-knave on the foolishness of those who play into his hands. And while this can develop into a satiric form of art in which the in-
triguer becomes the agent for satiric exposure, this need not be the writer's main purpose. There are light elements of this, but the parasite here, refuses to injure his host. In a final analysis, Messer Nicia is not only protected, but granted his own most compelling wish, the desire for children. Trickster can also work an action of escape, of punishment avoided. While he is in himself but a pragmatic manipulator, he provides both for a degree of wish-fulfillment in this play as well as for a degree of attack on vice. But the author must choose which of these trickster roles will prevail, the confectioner of the golden land or the exhibitor of fallen man, in the design of the play.

In himself trickster is neutral and thus ambivalent in nature; he must remain so in keeping with his type. It is the effect of his cynicism upon the action of this play in particular which has raised the most difficult problems. De Sanctis claimed that Ligurio is a being "entirely destitute of moral sense, who would have betrayed Christ for a good tip." "He is a common cheat, and if he were only a little more witty we should laugh at him. But as it is he is only hateful and contemptible." We may smile at De Sanctis' nineteenth-century sensibilities in reacting in such a morally straight-laced fashion, but he could not escape the feeling that the laughter in this play goes beyond "buffoonery" and that for this reason the work is harmed artistically. He senses disgust on Machiavelli's part in creating Timoteo. He is too crude, too cynical, so that for these and other reasons the play "has had its day. The depravity of the priests and their terrible influence on women and on families strikes us as a horrible subject; we of today could never, never make a comedy of it." His conclusion is that whoever comprehends the forces that make our social existence will win: "Chance, the supernatural, the marvellous, are all discredited, and are replaced by character. So Machiavelli the artist is the same, after all, as Machiavelli the politician, and Machiavelli the historian." The statement is, in a literal sense, quite true. Fortune no longer controls the events of the play. There are no coincidences, no miraculous recognition scenes, no recovered children. Everything which comes about depends upon human will and choice, and at the very centre of the play is the philosophy of rationalization and egoism, that men must justify their behaviour in difficult matters by choosing the certain good over an uncertain evil, a cognitive process, given man's egocentricity, which invariably leads to shrinking perspectives, and to the expression of self-interest covered over with a veneer of conscience-relaxing philosophy. That De Sanctis finds this insidious in its own right is to his
credit, so long as he is reading the ethos of the play correctly. The argument that the kings and princes of France employ the same mandrake potion with all its evil side effects in order to beget children is enough to sway Messer Nicia to the plan. That obedience to one's husband and the creation of another human life as a certain good, contrasted with the lesser evil of accepting the embraces of a stranger-victim who could die from the encounter is enough to bring Sostrata and Fra Timoteo into the plot. This device is the brain child of Ligurio, who cynically calculates the risks in such a proposal against the scruples it will encounter and wagers on unqualified success. The distressing factor in Ligurio's proposal is not that it tricks a woman into infidelity and a man into cuckoldry, but that the decisions made to achieve those ends indicate states of moral decline and collapse. De Sanctis believed he had every right to loath the trickster figure in this play for inaugurating such results. Trickster comedy at this juncture goes beyond satire; it becomes an art form of fallen man in which the perversions of the reason and will are the subjects of uncritical comic celebration.

We can, in fact, speak of the demonic conversions of Fra Timoteo and of Lucrezia. Ligurio's plot includes the death of an innocent man which he nevertheless succeeds in passing off as an unfortunate necessity in the procuring of an heir. Messer Nicia, in one speech, raises objections, but in the next is already thinking ahead to a way of finding a victim. We see in Lucrezia a pious woman of sweet and loyal nature, who is corrupted by her mother and her confessor to engage in an adulterous act, admissible because she sins only with her body, which is a venial sin, but not in her will. In the end, of course, she has been brought not only to accept Callimaco willingly, but to accept him permanently as her "lord, and master, and guide" (Act V). Lucrezia's absolute standards of honour and morality have been broken down to an ethic of pragmatic behaviour calculated by self-gratification.

In achieving such results, the animateur has managed not only to put his tricks into effect, but he has tainted the moral atmosphere of the entire play with his aberrant nature. This is an inevitable by-product of the creation of the new style of trickster. He has become the freelance opportunist who is prepared to work his skulduggery according to his own interests. Ligurio is not the self-celebrating parasite one sees in Jonson's Mosca, nor is he the daring overreacher, but the superior insight into human nature by which he manipulates everyone to his own ends offers previews into the type. Jonson, likewise, through his trickster figures in
Volpone dared to take his play to a dimension of depravity rarely contemplated in drama. In Ligurio’s success one is tempted to see not only a clever rascal, capable of a trick or two, but a demonic figure whose amorality by degrees pollutes all of the other characters.

The personality of the trickster is imposed upon the play in such a way that all become outsiders to their own urbanity and morality. Fra Timoteo comments upon his own involvement in the affair: “God knows that I have never thought of bringing harm to anyone; that I have kept my cell, said my office, looked after my parishioners. Then comes this devil Ligurio, who made me first dip my finger into mischief, then my arm, and then the whole of me and I still don’t know where it’s all going to end” (Act IV). Fra Timoteo was tricked into complicity by a false testing plot, but the lure of pocket money was too much to resist. Once in, he could not get out and so was led along. For the critic, once into this line of reasoning, it is not easy for him to get out either. De Sanctis admits that another era with different values gave life to this play and that it was beyond him to appreciate what that social atmosphere could create. One cannot deny that in a strictly moral sense trickster recreated the world in his own amoral image. But that is to deny the simultaneous delight which we are promised in seeing the trickster prevail, a victory for this entertainingly irreverent character and all he represents to our potential satisfaction.

Radin explains that the mythopoeic trickster “knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.” “Laughter, humour and irony permeate everything Trickster does.” In the very gesture which conveys man to the expression of his baser self, one sees also a gesture of redemption and escape, an incongruity which man deals with only through the release of tension which laughter brings. Trickster machinations allow us to turn the view of moral depravity inside out, to see in his antics an anarchic escape from moral repression. In the earliest accounts of the trickster archetype he plays a quadruple role of the trouble-maker and prankster, the comic god-man and phallus bearer who seduces women by trickery, the public benefactor and at times the role of the fool, the butt of public ridicule through his own stupidity. All of his roles have to do with survival, as it relates to actual fertility rites and to the preservation of social harmony necessary for group survival. Moreover, as a loner and outcast, the trick-
ster lived on the cutting edge of existence, relying upon his superior intelligence for self-preservation. In the New Comedy he reached an artistic nadir; restricted to the role of slave-accomplice, his offices nevertheless did contribute to marriage and fertility and his wit was a means of self defense. The survival trickster showed up directly in the medieval tales of Reynard the Fox and Til Eulenspiegel. In the stories of Boccaccio, many a lover became his own trickster in the winning of an illicit affair. It was for the erudite comedy to reassemble all of these traditions into a single expression of the impulses which lead men to the celebration of license and wit attached to fertility rites and to carnival, which was Machiavelli’s specific occasion and context for the writing of the Mandragola.

The plot of the Mandragola, typologically viewed, offers a pattern very similar to the extended carnival joke, a series of beffe which amount to an inversion of the familiar social order. It is an initiation into the upside-down world of license and indulgence which takes on meaning precisely as it achieves opposition to legal and moral restraint. It needs to function only at the level of the possible as opposed to the probable which the critics of the age accepted as appropriate to comedy. The game-like qualities of the plotting, the artificiality of the conventions aided in the relaxation of disbelief so that an imitation of contemporary characters and settings could nevertheless incorporate daring and novel manipulations of events. That was essentially the task of the animateur who, himself, in turn, becomes a figuration of the spirit of carnival.

Roberto Ridolfi’s confirmation that the play was written for the carnival season of 1518 is a significant corroboration of the appropriateness of the carnival logic within the play. The play begins with a discussion about the beauty of Florentine women and whether even the pious and extraordinarily beautiful Lucrezia Calfucci can be persuaded to take a lover. After all, she is married to a fool and a dottard which gives the lover double hope, since the husband will be easier to trick and the wife more easily reconciled to her infidelity. We know the spirit of the play already from such well-known tales as Boccaccio’s sixth of the third day in which Ricciardo lures Catella to the baths on false pretexts where he meets her in the dark and seduces her while she thinks she is embracing her own husband as a prelude to a tongue lashing that will cure him from hankering after other women. The plot brings about a kind of trade-off. A jealous husband gets his punishment, a lover his reward for wit and patience, the lady a bit of revenge
and some stolen pleasure to which she assents after the fact and which she agrees to repeat. In a legal sense Catella has been raped, no less so because her assaulter tells her he was sincere and because she comes to like him in the end. The case is much the same for Lucrezia. But no one keeps score like that in comedy, nor should one in considering the Mandragola. We note that the women in both stories are converted to better, more pragmatic points of view about their antiseptic lives and the delights of carnal love. In the upside-down world of carnival, this is not moral degradation, but rejuvenation. Lucrezia is not debauched, but delivered from a life of sterile piety and life-denying continence. Lucrezia is led the next day to the church door to be sanctified, for her husband tells her, "it is just as though you had been reborn" (Act V). She was feeling lively, indeed, whereas the night before she had "seemed half-dead." It is no accident that in a creative rather than a perverse way, the church is called upon to sanctify all that has taken place. "Your happiness is my happiness" says Ligurio to Callimaco, "everything's fallen out just as I said it would." There is nothing left to do but go to the church. In keeping with the theme, Fra Timoteo remarks, "And you, Madonna Sostrata seem to me to have recovered your youth" (Act V). As the song at the end of the second act has it, "Conception's a blessing — All else is forgot."

Cecchi plays out the same scenario in L'Assiuvolo, now doubled to include two students in competition for the same beautiful lady; she too is married to an old fool who fancies another woman, and the mother of one of the student's into the bargain. 21 Again the carnivalesque trade-offs are implemented, and both students are satisfied by the lucky appearance of a sister into whose bed one of the students comes by mistake. In that play, too, the women are converted. They decide to look after their pleasure, to continue the encounters after the close of the play and to force the jealous old husband to open up his doors as a cure for his jealousy, just as Messer Nicia presents the key of his house to Callimaco at the play's end.

The trickster himself may be a happy anarchist, concerned only with his own material survival at the cost of anyone he can find to exploit. But the ironic values of carnival necessitate his collusion in other motifs of survival and fertility which guarantee the future of the race. There are two fundamental preconditions in the Mandragola which pervade the entire play: the one is Callimaco's intense love longing and the imperatives in the natural man which it represents; the other is the sterility of the Calfuccis and
their intense desire for children. In romance comedy these are provided for together in marriage with all its legal and ceremonial sanctions. Machiavelli's play ingeniously separates the two, so that only the satisfaction of an illicit love with all its titillations can, at the same time, break the spell of infertility. To have an heir, Messer Nicia must accept a surrogate father to his children. Ligurio works that to Callimaco's satisfaction, without compromising the honour of any of the participants. Machiavelli carries the irony to the brink in having Messer Nicia grope the young man whom he introduces into his wife's embraces to make sure that he is a fit and sound candidate for the job. In this, Ligurio is the perfect carnival animateur because he has, under extraordinary circumstances, provided for the resuscitation of two young lovers and for an heir for the Calfuccis. Survival, in the most fundamental sense, is still the preponderant theme.

The carnival character of the play is confirmed in the parody of romance comedy which the play presents. In the final scene, the entire party finds itself again in the church where Messer Nicia requests prayers of thanksgiving and blessing for all who assisted in the provision of an heir. In a wonderfully ironic way, he places Lucrezia's hand into the hand of Callimaco in a gesture of gratitude for the doctor's good offices in administering the potion. In effect, a mock marriage takes place, and at the same time the unofficial institution of a ménage à trois. In making Ligurio an ex-marriage broker, Machiavelli has chosen ironically and well. If husband and wife are tricked in all this, they nevertheless receive the secret and not so secret desires of their hearts, without reprisal, without recrimination. To have achieved this in the face of human reticence, foolishness, prudery, sterility is to have gained a comic victory.

With an appraisal of this dimension, we see the full spectrum of the new emerging animateur, his dual capacity as satirist and as initiator of the comedy of escape. For this play, Ligurio becomes not only the outsider who can mock and ridicule, but more prevailingly a catalyst for the expression of the imperatives of nature in man, an intermediary figure whose witty stratagems allow for a temporary or prolonged reconciliation of pleasure to experience if not to virtue. His devices, both for the characters and the audience, subordinate behaviour and response to his anarchic will, inviting the expression of aberrant impulses, an interlude from the repression of social and religious mores. He disarms by degrees with his wit and playfulness, and where that will not suffice, he is made to serve as scapegoat, banished for a part which speaks so
truly about us that we are unable to accept it. In this he becomes
the ironic public benefactor, the magician-doctor through his
mandrake potion who cures infertility and brings a lovesick
youth, whose own well-being is threatened by unrequited love,
back to his health again.\textsuperscript{22} Trickster joins with nature insofar as
neither are concerned with morality, but only with opportunity.
Trickster joins with carnival because he too expresses the libertine
and rebellious, siding with the animal will which stands in oppo-
sition to our abstract and idealized views of the urbane existence.
Aldo Scaglione, in dealing with the moral climate of the Decame-
ron concludes that a counter-ethnic exists: the tales recognize that
"nature was stronger than man's will to thwart it."\textsuperscript{23} The genius I
have attributed to trickster in general experiences a renaissance in
these plot-intense plays, with their compact domestic settings,
represented by the Mandragola. The liberated animateur was essen-
tial for the creation of carnivalesque pranks which are extended
into plots in the erudite comedy. The strengthening of the role in
terms of realism, ambiguous personality and motivation, the
broadening repertoire of tricks invariably brought the playwright
to questions of purpose. The possibilities inherent in trickster
comedy, given the nature of the character and his proclivities as a
type, included new dimensions in the comedy of moral indigna-
tion and new dimensions in the comedy of carnival — of punish-
ment avoided. The Mandragola possesses both qualities, but the
orientation of Ligurio's genius is for the construction of the com-
edy of the inverted world. That, I would contend, was Machia-
venili's choice and purpose.

The inverted world is one manifestation of what Northrop Frye
has called the "new society" which must prevail at the end of any
complete comic action. It crystallizes around the hero and reveals
a "movement from pistis to gnosis, from a society controlled by
habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a
society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom. . . ."\textsuperscript{24} Such
conclusions, not unrelated to Saturnalia or a recollection of the
golden age, can never be more than relatively free of the memory
of imperfections brought to light by machinations of the intriguer
in the process of generating that new society. The trickster figure
possesses a complex nature from which these paradoxes derive al-
most inevitably, though diverse interpretations of his traits allow
for degrees of emphasis in the development of comic form,
whether for satiric realism or for romance. A fuller expression of
trickster's potential in the Mandragola allowed the play to become
the complex work it is.
In a larger sense, the question has to do with the value and propriety of carnival comedy itself, to which I can offer no better answer than that by George Santayana in an essay on carnival, wherein he concludes that those who fail to appreciate the mishaps and expedients which comedy brings as "the very texture of temporal being" are in themselves "less plastic and volatile than the general flux of nature." 25

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NOTES

*A shorter version of this paper was given at the Learned Societies Conference in Ottawa, 1982.


3 Salingar opines, for example, and with considerable justification given the heavy borrowing not only of his plot materials but the moral ambience of his tales, that "Boccaccio supplies the Renaissance playwrights with the whole groundwork of his comedy, the contrast between witty love and inept love, and the contest of Love and Wit with Fortune." Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy, p. 210. To say more here about respective debts to the various sources ancient and contemporary is to anticipate my argument.

4 The realism of the play, its representation of contemporary characters and manners, has been the traditional grounds for singling out The Mandragola for praise above all the other plays of the period. Goldoni sums up the difficulties and distinctions of the play in his memoirs. "It was neither the free style nor the scandalous intrigue of the piece which fascinated me; its lubricity even disgusted me, and I could perceive that the abuse of confession was a heinous crime both in the eye of God and man; but it was the first comedy of character which had ever fallen into my hands, and I was quite enchanted with it." Cited in J.R. Hale, The Literary Works of Machiavelli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. xxiii-xxiv. All quotations from the play are taken from this translation.

5 Two such studies may be mentioned, though neither relates directly to the approach taken by this paper. Theodore Sumberg, "La Mandragola: An Interpretation," The Journal of Politics, No. 2 (May 1961), 230-40, sees Callimaco as a prince with Ligurio as his minister. Messer Nicia is a corrupt Florence from which Lucrezia, the body politic, must be taken by whatever deceit and fraud necessary. In a related way Leo Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli (Glencoe, Ill.: The
Free Press, 1958), pp. 284-86 compares Callimaco’s virtues with those of the politically astute prince. The relationship between the end-justifying-the-means philosophy of Timoteo and of Il Principe strikes me as being an ironic and witty rather than a cynically real one. The ethos of comedy turns that kind of pragmatism on its head when the prize is a married woman.

6 This is but one manifestation of the play’s ties with the novelle. Callimaco’s amorous pursuits resemble those of Lodovico (Decameron VII. vii) who travels from France to Bologna to meet and win Madam Beatrice, whose beauty had been celebrated in a discussion of “the fair ladies of France and England and other parts of the world.” He fell in love with her and resolved to gain her love by becoming a servant in her household.

7 The choice of the parasite is a significant one; it represents a metamorphosis of one kind of character into another. Of Ligurio as a parasite, Radcliff-Umstead remarks that, “Machiavelli rose above the schematic character type in portraying him” p. 131. We do not have the familiar asides on his glutony; Ligurio never talks about it, though he has provided well for himself in that way by the play’s end. Machiavelli has, in fact, merged the parasite role with the role of the animateur. The strongest hints of this new direction in classical comedy derive from Gnatho in Terence’s Eunuchus. Gnatho celebrates his own witty success in tricking his host: “Good heavens! how much one man excels another! What a difference between a fool and a man with brains . . . There is a class of men who set up for being the head in everything and aren’t. It’s them I track. I say yes to everything they do and say, that’s the trade that pays far the best nowadays.” Terence, trans. John Sargeaunt (London and New York: Loeb Classics, 1912) Vol. I. pp. 257-59. He speaks of founding a school of Gnathonists. He plays tricks on others, taking sides always where his best interests lie. He becomes a total opportunist, though never at the cost of losing his host. Thus, he is a peacemaker as well. He maintains his deceptions so that none are injured by the truth. He is capable of working indirectly through others, avoiding responsibility for his own gags. In Gnatho one sees the outlines of the parasite-trickster who comes to his apogee in such characters as Jonson’s Mosca in Volpone. Machiavelli makes initial progress in the creation of a new animateur type.

8 Ligurio’s personal motivation, apart from financial reward, is merely hinted at in the play. He is not self-celebratory in the same way the Elizabethan tricksters sometimes are. He acts as a monitor of Callimaco’s uncontrolled passion and alludes to a desire to aid Callimaco which goes beyond money. He seems particularly bent on ridiculing Nicia who, as a lawyer and citizen, should not have been so simple minded. We even detect a touch of envy at one point when he comments on Messer Nicia’s luck. “He’s rich. He’s got a wife who’s beautiful, amiable, discreet and fit to be a queen,” and this in spite of his stupidity (p. 14). All other considerations would seem to fall outside the expressed evidence in the play. Our understanding of motivations of a more general type come from the nature of the role and its function in the play.

9 The play alludes briefly to another arrangement of comic trickster characters which was to have a large place in the renaissance theatre: the league of confidence men. By dint of the experimental new dimensions given to Ligurio, he is able to call upon accomplices to aid in his plot who rely upon tandem trickery, resulting in more elaborately fraudulent devices incorporating occult sciences, mountebank practices, false social institutions. Ariosto’s Il Negromante offers a sixteenth-century travelling sharkerst who swindles the naive with his astrological lore. In Bruno’s Candelato we are treated to several rogues who work in league to dupe three gulls who are in turn miserly, superstitious and pedantic. New types have emerged to form the farce, including women tricksters, the gypsy Scaramuré and the bawd Lucia. These join forces with a courtesan and a traveller who assumes the guise of a captain of the watch. There is trickery through alchemy and pick-pocketing resulting in a public lashing of one of the
The question of misogyny in this play is difficult to settle. Madam Sostrata is a tool character to the plot and not of great significance. Ligurio assumes that all women have their price and can be made to see where their true pleasure lies if the right manner is employed. But he assumed equally the corruptibility of men. Fra Timoteo thinks Lucrezia will be easily tempted: "All women are a little light in the head; if one of them can string two words together she is considered a marvel — in the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king" (p. 36). This attitude is commonplace enough in the witty seduction plot. Machiavelli's Tale of Belfagor (original title The Devil Takes A Wife, written between 1515 and 1520) is, on the other hand, patently anti-feminist, a sustained joke about the shrewishness and rampant imprudence of women. Nevertheless, Lucrezia as a character shows more integrity than the others in the play, argues her position as one of force majeur, and escapes recrimination on all sides.

Piccolomini defends his plays by means of a typical statement of their moral intent: "comedies are meant to be a mirror to human life, by means of which all vices are exposed so that, once known, they may be avoided. Some people will object that this play is too bitingly critical; we will leave them unanswered, since that objection has only been raised by those who have seen their own faults criticized and whose injuries cannot heal unless they smart a little." Alessandro, Prologue to second performance. Yet Alessandro is as much in the carnival tradition as the Mandragola; the defense is special pleading, bent on disarming those who complained of the immorality of these plays.

"When your messenger arrived I was on the privy, engaged in contemplating the follies of this world of ours, and especially in working out how to choose a preacher after my own heart." "... I want to find one who would show them how to go to the Devil; they would like someone who was wise, sincere and genuine, while I would like to find one who was madder than Ponzo ... " "... I spend my time pondering how to sow enough scandal, here and elsewhere, to make them fall to beating one another with clogs, and if I don't loose [sic] my wits I think I shall succeed ..." Letter to Francesco Guicciardini, May, 1521, The Literary Works of Machiavelli, pp. 160-61.

Kennard believed that no other comedy of that era anatomized what appear to be the vices of the day as effectively as the Mandragola, that it "was accepted by Machiavelli's contemporaries as a vigorous and satirical representation of the Florence and Italian society of the Cinquecento" The Italian Theatre I. p. 117. But that may be too literal an interpretation of the play — that its realism is bent only on anatomizing vice in a pejorative and didactic way.

There are many models for Messer Nicia in previous plays and novelle. Radcliff-Umstead sees his most immediate predecessor in Boccaccio's Calandrino, The Birth of Modern Comedy in Renaissance Italy, p. 121. Both characters are naive and self-deceived about their own wits and insights. They are not totally devoid of sense, but for all that, fall easily into the snares set for them by the more cunning intriguers. See Decameron, VIII. iii. and vi; IX. iii. and v.


This character has provoked probably the most violent and the most differing reactions among critics. For Ireneo Sanesi, La Commedia, 2 vols. (Milan: F. Vallardi, 1954), I. p. 264 he is totally devoid of moral integrity: for Radcliff-Umstead, he is a man of considerable piety who is misled, has "twinges of conscience," knows he has erred; "at most he is an immoral figure, but not amoral. This priest is not actively sinful" p. 130. Hale sees him as a continuation of a tradition of hypocritical friars, but that this one has brought more "shame upon his calling" than the others with his "stately parody of the confessional manner ..." pp. xxv-xxvi. In general the nineteenth and early twentieth century critics are far more indignant than more recent critics who take a more balanced ana-
lytical approach.

18 Among the most important generic studies on the subject is Paul Radin’s *The Trickster: A study in American Indian Mythology* with commentaries by Karl Kerényi and C.G. Jung (London: Philosophical Library, 1956), a book to which all students of the subject are indebted. Little has, as yet, been done with the archetype in the critical analysis of recent literature, though ancient and so-called primitive literatures have received analysis as in Norman O. Brown’s *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1947). Radin sees the figure as a *speculum mentis*, “man’s struggle with himself and with a world into which he had been thrust without his volition and consent.” Every society must confront the paradoxes contained in its social structures. Laughter and mythopoeic figures serve in comedy to reconcile man to these anomalies.

19 Radin states that “although repeatedly combined with other myths and frequently drastically reorganized and reinterpreted, its basic plot seems always to have succeeded in reasserting itself.” I would claim that the drama we are dealing with is part of that tradition because of the predominance of the trickster role, and that the drama is being used as a *speculum mentis* in much the same way as the trickster myth was used in aboriginal literatures.


22 Callimaco, in telling his audience that his longing has arrived at a desperate state, was identifying for them not only a romantic devotion, but a state of passion which was then considered a form of disease. In a medical sense he was suffering from lovesickness. “I’ve got to do something, even if it seems mad or dangerous or scandalous — even if it’s criminal, I’d rather die than go on living like this. If I could sleep, if I could eat, if I could enjoy a conversation — if I could find any sort of relief . . . if I can’t see a single ray of hope, than I shall die” (Act I). The medical treatises of the period treated the subject extensively, discussing the causes, the physiological reactions to love, the nature of love melancholy and its cures. Ironically, many of these treatises suggested, as one last sure cure, to let the lovers have their way. By degrees, then, the doctor in charge of the patient turned from medic to panders, and science entered the realm of comedy. Burton, at the end of a long ancient and medieval tradition, relates: “When you have all done, saith Avicenna, there is no speedier or safer course, than to join the parties together according to their desires and wishes . . .” “Yea, but ‘tis hard, ‘tis difficult, this cannot conveniently be done, by reason of many and several impediments. Sometimes both parties themselves are not agreed: Parents, Tutors, Masters, Guardians will not give consent; Laws, Customs, Statutes hinder; poverty, superstition, fear and suspicion: many men dote on one woman. . . .” “And hard is the choice . . . when one is compelled either by silence to die with grief, or by speaking to live with shame” *Anatomy of Melancholy*, eds. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1927), pp. 798-99. Burton, in fact, provides a provocatively complete list of comic formulae. The doctor as comic *animateur* must work the patient’s cure while at the same time discrediting and by-passing the obstructing figure and avoiding shame. In the case of the *Mandragolet*, the patterns are perfectly superimposed. Ligirio is the doctor healer to his society, given the advanced state of Callimaco’s love malady. This is merely a way of seeing the same mythic healing and regeneration structure in different terms.

23 Aldo D. Scaglione, *Nature and Love in the Late Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 101 ff. Scaglione focuses his defense of the new society in the *Decameron* on a change in attitudes toward women, a break with
medieval asceticism. The tales demonstrate "the ineradicability of man's attraction to women, therefore of the goodness of the sexual instinct as part of nature's plans, and the unavoidable defect of all attempts to stifle nature by escape." With the borrowing of material comes the new ethic as well, which pervaded not only the works of Cavalcanti and Dante, but in its own way, the comedy of carnival with its provision for sexual gratification as the central condition of the transformed society at the play's end.

25 George Santayana, "The Comic Mask" and "Carnival" in *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 141. Santayana develops ideas on the ambiguity of moral experience: "all facts and objects in nature can take on opposite moral tints." Experience seen in the light of the animal will creates desire and fear, followed by a sense of the good or evil in events rather than the spontaneous manifestation of nature. We are caught by the cares of specific times and places. We fear destiny and we falsify, but such emotions are by no means inevitable; the thing in itself maintains its own joy and does not fear change. In comedy and carnival one restores this free play, youthfulness, the sense of the ridiculous. P. 140 ff.