
Di Maria’s book examines the imitative process in seven Italian Renaissance plays, five comedies and two tragedies. It is divided into eight chapters: seven per play, plus an overview introduction on the poetics of imitation in the classical and Renaissance eras; it closes with a conclusion which briefly charts the development of the comic and tragic genres following the composition of the plays investigated. Though plays are studied separately, Di Maria lends cohesion to his work by approaching their imitation process primarily via character modifications and the representation of actual reality for audience engagement.

The introductory chapter *Imitation: The Link between Past and Present* builds on the premise that “imitation is a means through which the present turns to the past for guidance and inspiration” (3). Following on the heels of humanists, who idealized models of classical Rome and Greece, dramatists of Renaissance Italy turned to classical theatre and agreed upon theatrical imitation as adaptation of borrowed material to the context of their times. While viewers took pride in recognizing classical sources and playwrights in vying with them, a play employing ingenious stagecraft while addressing the times of both the playwright and audience was the hallmark of an original and entertaining form of theatre.

Di Maria’s play analysis begins with Niccolò Machiavelli’s celebrated comedies *Mandragola* (1518/19) and *Clizia* (1525). Borrowing from Boccaccio’s tale of Catella and Ricciardo, Machiavelli adds characters to *Mandragola* enabling the thematic shift from the power of love in the source to criticism of a corrupt contemporary society. Staging his characters in current Florence, Machiavelli exposes those who undermine society’s institutions and dramatizes the morality of “necessità” defining his times. A more slavish imitation of its source (*Plautus’s* *Casina*), Machiavelli’s *Clizia* accords more depth to characters by underscoring the motivations driving their behaviours. The son, father and wife—farcical figures in the Roman play—become complex individuals vindicating “social stability and traditional values” (60). The vindication of bourgeois values is not, however, the overriding theme in *Clizia* (61). The *amator senex* (embodied in the Nicomaco character) dramatizes the human fear of facing old age and may be a metaphor for Machiavelli’s existential crisis as a fifty-six year-old man. (Nicomaco’s name combines the first four letters of Machiavelli’s first and last names.)

Though Giovan Maria Cecchi’s *Assiuolo* (1550) borrows material from different sources (Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Plautus), it blends multiple subplots into a cohesive drama and creates authentic characters. Cecchi rearranges the play’s plot sequentially and alters the roles of Ambrogio and Oretta as the *amator senex* and the adulterous wife, thus distorting their source counterparts. The character adjustments enable Cecchi to denounce the odious behaviours of society while simultaneously underscoring “the incongruity of spectators’ disapproval of Ambrogio’s vices and their indifference towards Oretta’s promiscuous adultery” (82).

*Grotto’s Emilia: Fiction Meets Reality,* underscores Luigi Grotto’s bold attempt to challenge contemporary notions of stage realism. Plautus’s tale of Periphanes set in ancient Greece is transposed to modern-day Constantinople in *Emilia* (1579),
where characters and place remind Venetians (*Emilia* was first staged in Venice) of recent Turkish atrocities. Groto employs various techniques—self-referential characters; ambiguity and irony; comic elements; and character adjustments—intended to arouse the spectators’ emotional response towards a story that, in reality, speaks about them. In *Emilia*, Groto forces viewers to reflect upon theatrical devices as a means through which to tell a story beyond the stage.

Chapter six examines Giambattista Della Porta’s *Gli duoi fratelli rivali* (1590), an adaptation of Matteo Bandello’s Timbreo and Girondo prose narrative. Della Porta’s play moves from medieval Messina to Renaissance Salerno, where the fictional world of the stage represents the reality of Spanish occupation in Naples. The analysis focuses on characters, who portray members of the audience’s reality, and on the dramaturgical impact of the playwright’s addition of comic figures. Primarily, these stock characters are meant “to lift the somber mood of the story” (122) with their histrionics and language. They also foreshadow the growing popularity of the *commedia dell’arte*, with its improvised comedy and *zanni* characters.

Chapters seven and eight consider two tragedies: Giovan Battista Giraldi’s *Orbecche* (1541), an imitation of Giraldi’s own prose narrative, and Lodovico Dolce’s *Marianna* (1565), an adaptation of Josephus’s historical account of King Herod and Mariamne. Through its stage representation of gruesome details and murders, *Orbecche* challenges traditional aesthetic preferences, inaugurating a new era for the tragic genre (128). Moreover, it shifts the emphasis from the theme of love in the source to contemporary issues: 1) *la querelle des femmes* (conveyed in Orbecche’s fierce courage); and 2) the notion of kingship. In *Marianna*, Dolce intensifies Marianna’s suffering, rearranging the order of executions, and highlights the king’s excessive cruelty towards his wife rather than his prototype’s fear of treason. Marianna stirs the audience’s pity for the suffering of the cruel deaths of her sons and mother (a loving figure in Dolce’s rendition). Erode’s sudden remorse and uncontrollable anger make him a tragic figure, too, as he arouses compassion as a victim of human flaw and passion. Dolce’s dramatization of these historical figures “elevates them above barriers of time and culture,” (166) rendering Josephus’s account of them more impersonal.

Di Maria’s study successfully demonstrates what serious dramaturgical considerations Renaissance playwrights were required and expected to make to move beyond mere imitation towards an innovative form of theatre. While the eight plays examined adhered to classical teachings of theatre (e.g. Aristotle’s unities of action, time and space) and reworked familiar storylines, they simultaneously met modern challenges and demands. Though sometimes repetitive in its approach, Di Maria’s investigation emphasizes character adjustments and audience engagement. The strength of Di Maria’s study lies in the latter aspect, however. The message that the playwright wished to convey in his stage representation necessitated the audience’s acceptance and understanding of it. Indeed, the play’s social commentary about the spectator’s lived realities makes these eight Renaissance plays more than mere imitators of the classical stage but examples of innovative and original theatre productions.

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