

Yael Manes. *Motherhood and Patriarchal Masculinities in Sixteenth-Century Italian Comedy*.

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Analyzing five Renaissance comedies — Machiavelli's *Mandragola* and *Clizia*, Antonio Landi's *Il commodo*, Giovan Maria Cecchi's *La stiava*, and Ariosto's *I suppositi* — in terms of gender and authority, Yael Manes finds in them “a relationship both between motherhood and power and between maternal identity

and authority” (2). A welcome innovation in the scholarly discourse on Renaissance comedy, Manes’s study describes the synergy between weak(ened) father figures and the bifurcation of maternal figures into either strong ones or weak-absent-substituted ones. A particular focus is on situations in which the prescribed female roles of wife and mother are brought into conflict by the competing interests of husband and child(ren), the choices of female characters in resolving the conflict, and the response of male characters to the solutions.

Some conclusions are undermined by an overstatement of the role of female characters absent an acknowledgment of the role of their birth patriline in their power and authority through dower wealth, social prominence, and physical defense. Manes, a historian, also largely forgoes consideration of the broader historical context: the weakening of the entire Italian male authority system by the invasions of outside powers and the loss of the great wealth derived from commerce, which gave women opportunities to act and dowries an increased role in family finances. A good sampling of these issues is offered in the *Mandragola*, set in motion by Callimaco from his remote location in Paris, where he was sent as protection from Charles VIII’s army and whence he plots to seduce the wife of the elderly and foolish man who stayed behind. Manes characterizes Sostrata as the “prime mover” (22) of the play because she convinces her daughter Lucrezia to act according to self-interest rather than conventional morality. Manes however fails to perceive that the prime movers are Callimaco and Nicia with their complementary drives to sexual satisfaction and procreation, without which there would be no advantage to Lucrezia, or that the latter’s (inherited) wealth makes her unusually free to act once her moral scruples have been dispensed with. If the study had not been confined to *commedia erudita*, an enlightening example of truly free maternal authority would have been provided by Donna Menega of Ruzante’s *Betia*, the unmarried head of a farmstead, whose authority to give her daughter in marriage is recognized by the local civic official and who recruits and commands a force of men to reclaim the rebellious girl. Sostrata merely consents to a plot hatched by men.

The historical context would have provided a more cogent interpretive framework for Antonio Lando’s *Il comodo*, entertainment for the wedding of Cosimo de’ Medici and Eleanora d’Aragona. The strength and sexuality of the upper-class Cassandra and the need for her husband to control and confine her to the domestic sphere while himself managing the marriage of their daughter would have been illuminated by a consideration of the importance of the Spanish, the daughter of whose viceroy in Naples the bride was, to keeping the Medici in power in Italy.

The real news of these comedies, which the author acknowledges indirectly, is, instead, the aggressive and self-authorized means by which the younger generation of males, and to some extent females, wrests control over their lives from fathers and mothers weakened by the precipitous decline of their financial and political base, an additional understanding of the new and strange custom of old men being “suppositi” by young men (cf. 109–11) to which Ariosto alludes in *I suppositi*.

That play and *La stiava* provide compelling evidence of the takeover. While in the former, of 1509, the action is set in motion by the audacity of the well-born but motherless girl wandering the streets on her own and attracting the attention of a young Sicilian and by his daring in being hired as a servant and seducing her, which will likely force a marriage to which the fathers would not have otherwise consented, in the latter, of 1546, the wellborn young man already by the first scene, unbeknownst to his father, has married his beloved, whom he believes to be a slave.

Finally: if one chooses to index the names of scholars whose works are cited in the footnotes, all should be indexed.

LINDA L. CARROLL
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