

# Machiavelli's Medical *Mandragola*: Knowledge, Food, and Feces

SUSAN GAYLARD, *University of Washington*

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*This article argues that the medical discourse of Machiavelli's "Mandragola" is profoundly important both for understanding the play and for revisiting its author's philosophical and political writings. I show that discussions in "Mandragola" of doctors, medicine, eating, and elimination ultimately break down the traditional paradigm that opposes truth, nourishment, and healing to deception, problematic food, and illness. The play's extended discourse around medicine undermines the ideal of the physician who heals the state and the pharmakon of words that heal the soul (in Plato, Livy, Saint Augustine, and Machiavelli's "Discorsi"), questioning in turn notions of knowledge and truth.*

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## INTRODUCTION

THE CHOICE OF the title *Mandragola* (Mandrake, ca. 1513–18) for the first comedy of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) offers a key for understanding the political and philosophical messages of the play. It is clear that Machiavelli spent a number of years crafting this influential work during his forced exile from Florence after the overthrow of the republic and return of the Medici. The play was published independently of its author in both 1518 and 1522 under the designation *Comedia di Callimaco e di Lucrezia* (Comedy of Callimaco and of Lucrezia); Machiavelli's own circle often referred to it as *Messer Nicia*.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, the third printed version (1524) reintroduced the

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<sup>1</sup> Ridolfi was the first to identify the two earliest editions as Florentine (unknown printer) and Venetian (Alessandro Bindoni): Ridolfi, 32–33, 47–61. For the problematic dating and presumably long composition of the play, see the review of past discussions and evidence in Pasquale Stoppelli's introductory note in Machiavelli, 2017, 125–41.

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internal title specified in the prologue: *Mandragola*. As far as scholars know, Machiavelli had an active role in publishing only *L'arte della guerra* (The art of war), although Ridolfi speculated that the author himself insisted on reintroducing the label *Mandragola* in 1524.<sup>2</sup> Yet as Giovanni Aquilecchia argued, it would have made practical and commercial sense to accept the previously published title.<sup>3</sup> Irrespective of its authorship, the change shows that the internal title was considered worth the risk of publishing the comedy under a new designation, which could have resulted in commercial failure.<sup>4</sup>

The unofficial titles, *Comedia di Callimaco e di Lucrezia* and *Messer Nicia*, highlight the centrality of the characters to the action of the plot. Callimaco, a young Florentine who has been living in Paris for twenty years, has returned to Florence to verify the much-extolled beauty and virtue of Lucrezia, wife of the dolt Messer Nicia. Callimaco immediately falls in love with Lucrezia, who is even more beautiful and virtuous than imagined. With the help and guidance of the parasite Ligurio, Callimaco convinces Nicia that he is a doctor who can make Nicia and Lucrezia conceive. The remedy hinges on a fictitious mandrake potion that Lucrezia must drink; the first man to sleep with Lucrezia after drinking the potion, however, will die. For this reason, a substitute must be found to bed Lucrezia and absorb the effects of the poison. Nicia, Ligurio, and the friar Timoteo (disguised as Callimaco) together capture a supposedly unknown young man (a disguised Callimaco), who beds the reluctant Lucrezia and convinces her to continue the liaison indefinitely. The title *Mandragola* thus points to an imagined medical solution for two real medical problems: Callimaco's lovesickness and the married couple's failure to conceive. Yet critics have long noted that this is far from the typical happy ending of a comedy, which should end the comedic masquerade and restore societal norms.

Ronald L. Martinez has pointed out that the medical title has a political valence. Machiavelli's *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (Discourses on Livy, 1513–ca. 1519), written around the same time as *Mandragola*, repeatedly argue that cities need a physician to heal their problems.<sup>5</sup> The idea of the statesman as a doctor applying necessary remedies has a long history: Machiavelli's major source Livy (59 BCE–17 CE) likewise used medical allegories to discuss the difficulties of healing a corrupted state; following this lead, Machiavelli's *Discorsi* claim that “in a great city accidents arise every day that have need of a physician, and according

<sup>2</sup> Ridolfi, 70–76.

<sup>3</sup> Aquilecchia, 74–77.

<sup>4</sup> Aquilecchia, 76.

<sup>5</sup> Martinez, 1983. See, for example, Machiavelli, 2001, 2:785 (3.49.1); Machiavelli, 1995, 18 (3.26–28). For the problematic dating and unfinished state of the *Discorsi*, see Francesco Bausi's introduction in Machiavelli, 2001, 1:xi–xxxiii.

to their importance, one must find a wiser physician.”<sup>6</sup> The proem to the *Discorsi* notes explicitly that both law and medicine depend on the knowledge of the ancients; this reliance on historic examples contrasts with what Machiavelli says is the failure of modern politicians to read histories as models for the present.<sup>7</sup>

The medical significance of Machiavelli's *Mandragola* encompasses not only a political but also a philosophical dimension that in fact derives from reading the ancients. In the same way that Livy and Machiavelli imagine a statesman who heals the city, Plato envisions a philosopher who is, as Michael Rinella notes, a “moral physician.”<sup>8</sup> Plato's works were translated in Florence during the later fifteenth century and were widely discussed in Machiavelli's educational milieu. Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) had famously translated Plato into Latin; complete translations appeared in print in 1484 (Florence), 1491 (Venice), and 1494 (Florence). Despite renewed attention to Machiavelli's sources, scholars have not remarked on the curious points of contact between one Platonic dialogue, *Charmides* (ca. 380 BCE), and the basic plot of *Mandragola*.<sup>9</sup> *Charmides* was translated both by Ficino and (at least in part) by Agnolo Poliziano (1454–94); Poliziano's version was published by Aldus in 1498 and a full edition of his translations appeared in Paris in 1512.<sup>10</sup> In *Charmides*, Critias convinces Socrates to claim that he is a physician who can cure the headaches of the young Charmides. While in Machiavelli's *Mandragola* the young and handsome doctor Callimaco deceives the old and foolish Nicia, Plato's Charmides is a beautiful youth to the old, ugly, and deceiving doctor Socrates. In fact, Socrates must overcome his physical attraction to the youth in order to focus on curing Charmides's headaches and (since the head is the seat of the soul) lead his soul toward temperance. Socrates's medical masquerade is what Rinella has dubbed a “noble lie,” which in Plato functions like a health-restoring *pharmakon*—a term traditionally understood as having the dual meaning of both remedy and poison.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the

<sup>6</sup> Machiavelli, 2001, 2:785 (3.49.2); translation from Machiavelli, 1996, 308. This passage introduces further medical borrowings: *Discorsi* 3.49.3 derives from Livy's *Ab urbe condita* 8.18, and *Discorsi* 3.49.4 from *Ab urbe condita* 9.46.

<sup>7</sup> Machiavelli, 2001, 1:3–7.

<sup>8</sup> Rinella, 146.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Eisner; also Bausi, esp. 274–90; Black; Celenza, esp. 102–33; Ginzburg.

<sup>10</sup> See Hankins, 2:742–51; his catalogue describes Poliziano's *Charmides* as fragmentary: it is unclear whether or not Poliziano translated the entire dialogue or merely part of it as no full translation survives. His prefatory letter to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici (taken from the Aldine editio princeps of 1498) appears in Hankins, 2:623–26.

<sup>11</sup> The noble lie is “a deceit that supplements the partially or fully deceitful drugs of pharmacy's many competitors”: Rinella, 147. See Rinella, 136–40, for a critique of Derrida's understanding of *pharmakon*, which (Rinella points out) could indicate a number of substances prepared by apothecaries, including cosmetics and painters' pigments.

deception in *Mandragola* enables the handsome and fraudulent doctor Callimaco to satisfy his lust by establishing a continuing extramarital liaison with Nicia's wife Lucrezia. In each text, a man claims knowledge of medicine in order to manipulate his interlocutors and thus try to heal both an immediate medical problem (Charmides's headaches; Lucrezia's infertility and Callimaco's lovesickness) and a larger societal deficiency (Charmides's lack of temperance; the absence of an heir, Callimaco's idleness, and Fra' Timoteo and Ligurio's lack of money).

Machiavelli and his contemporaries would also have had more immediately in mind another model for the healer of both body and soul: Christ, aided by his vicars on earth. The idea of Christ as physician, adapted from the classical ideal of the philosopher-doctor, appears as early as the Gospels.<sup>12</sup> Christ was the great doctor who healed through words; he is described as both "the Word" and "the bread of life" (John 1:1, 6:35). These interrelated ideas of words that heal and nourish were expanded on by Saint Augustine, who referred to Christ as "the best of all doctors," and likewise considered himself to be a physician in the midst of a plague.<sup>13</sup> Augustine frequently described Christian teachings as life-giving food, declaring, "We share a common larder in heaven; that, you see, is where the word of God comes from."<sup>14</sup> Scholars concur that Augustine had a profound influence not just on fourteenth-century writers like Dante, but also on Machiavelli and his contemporaries, even if, as in the case of Machiavelli, that debt went largely unacknowledged.<sup>15</sup> Despite Augustine's dependence on words to teach his pupils, he famously abandoned his post as professor of rhetoric, "a seller of words" ("venditor verborum"), as incompatible with his new religion, and was subsequently suspicious of rhetoric divorced from truth, as he opposed empty words (*verba*) to the reality of things (*res*).<sup>16</sup> Augustine's *Confessions* in particular posits a division between meaningless and destructive loquacity, mere words, and the Word of Life.<sup>17</sup> While Dante's *Commedia* struggled to maintain a distinction between nourishing truth and scatological lies,<sup>18</sup> *Mandragola* subtly but consistently undermines this opposition, as it is the loquacious "seller of words" who triumphs.

<sup>12</sup> See Kolbet. Examples from the Gospels include Mark 2:17; Matthew 9:12; Luke 5:31.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, 1992, 41 (97A.2); Kolbet, 118–19.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, 1992, 24 (95.1).

<sup>15</sup> See Warner and Scott; Straumann. Scholarship has tended to focus on Machiavelli's response to Augustine's interpretation of history in *The City of God*.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, 1997, 210 (9.2.2), also 76–85 (3.2–14); Kolbet, 106–17; Tell.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Augustine, 1997, 288–92 (11.7–11); see Tell's thoughtful analysis of Augustine's position on rhetoric in light of *The Confessions*.

<sup>18</sup> See Durling, whose careful analysis makes clear that Dante struggles to separate poetry from deceit.

Words and knowledge are central for Plato's *Charmides*, Augustine, Dante, and *Mandragola*. In their influential analyses of *Mandragola*, Ronald L. Martinez and Jane Tylus have underlined, respectively, medical politics and the power that comes with knowledge. Applying the idea of the *pharmakon* to Machiavelli, Martinez contends that medicine functions in *Mandragola* through the ancient example of Lucretia, whose rape and suicide—like a “*pharmakon* that purges Rome from the disease of tyranny”—overturned the kingdom and established the Roman republic.<sup>19</sup> In Martinez's analysis, Machiavelli's Lucrezia initially resembles Livy's exemplary Lucretia, but her night with Callimaco metaphorically cures her of this resemblance so she starts instead to look like “Fortuna and Natura . . . , the traditional adversaries of the designs of masculine desire.”<sup>20</sup> While it is certainly true, as Martinez suggests, that Lucrezia's tone in the play's final scenes is commanding to the point of imperiousness, her longest and most forceful speech is reported by the male character (Callimaco) who has just persuaded her to continue the liaison by hinting that it will not incur *infamia* (disgrace).<sup>21</sup> Callimaco's mention of *infamia* is a tactic proposed by Ligurio; Tylus has argued compellingly that Ligurio manipulates the play's outcome by threatening to reveal hidden knowledge—and that this continually deferred menace, “the spectacle of infamy,” undercuts the humanistic ideal of theater as a public space, a kind of ideal city where all citizens can see and be seen.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, Tylus observes, the narrator of the prologue threatens the audience with his ability to malign others.<sup>23</sup> Both Martinez's and Tylus's analyses hinge on the claim of truth: Callimaco claims to report Lucrezia's words; Ligurio and the narrator assert knowledge of hidden truths. Yet *Mandragola*—both the title and the play itself—highlights the fiction of a mandrake potion. Readers of Lucretia rape narratives have often remarked that the threat of infamy needs no basis in fact: Livy's Lucretia submits to Tarquin because he threatens to assert that something false (her lack of chastity) is true; the threat has the paradoxical effect of making her submission a fact. Likewise, the threat of infamy posed by Callimaco, Ligurio, and Machiavelli's narrator works whether or not it is grounded in knowledge or fact.

My analysis brings together the notion of the *pharmakon* and the claim of knowledge (based in fact or not), to argue that *Mandragola*'s discussions of doctors, medicine, eating, and elimination undermine a classical and Christian

<sup>19</sup> Martinez, 1983, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Martinez, 1983, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 71 (5.4).

<sup>22</sup> Tylus, 656–86.

<sup>23</sup> Tylus, 681.

tradition that saw truth and food as nourishing and restorative—in opposition to falsehood, problematic eating, and sickness. Machiavelli's distorting of this imagined binary not only allows for extended sexual innuendo related to the belly and food but moreover problematizes both the idea of the physician and the distinction between nourishing truth and toxic lies. In the *Discorsi*, as in Livy and Plato, it is a physician who heals the state; in Plato, the New Testament, and Augustine, the right doctor might use a *pharmakon* of words to cure the soul. Yet *Mandragola's* intricate parody of these medical tropes collapses concepts of knowledge and truth, overturning Augustine's opposition between words and reality.

### WHY DID MACHIAVELLI CHOOSE THE MANDRAKE?

The long history of the mandrake in medicine, philosophy, and literature has strong resonances for Machiavelli's engagement with these three discourses. In ancient Greece and Rome, authors as diverse as Aristotle and Pliny the Elder discussed the mandrake's anesthetic properties.<sup>24</sup> Mandrake juice was known to relieve anxiety, so might be appropriate for the lovesick Callimaco and the reluctant Lucrezia; in stronger doses, it caused delirium or even a comatose state.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, mandrakes make sense as medicine for Nicia and Lucrezia since tradition associated the mandrake with fertility and conception, from the story of Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel (Genesis 30:14–18), to the medieval bestiary *Physiologus*, to the fifteenth-century court doctor Michele Savonarola.<sup>26</sup> Typically imagined as having the form of a human man or woman but lacking a head, the mandrake had longstanding associations both with the demon world and with spiritual redemption. According to a plethora of sources, the mandrake can only be dug at night, when it is supposedly luminous; after the herb gatherer has dug all around the root, it must be removed from the earth by a dog pulling a cord tied to the mandrake.<sup>27</sup> The dog then dies to expiate the transgression against the mandrake: in *Mandragola*, it is the fictitiously unknown young man (Callimaco) who is imagined as dying. According to Josephus, the plant had the power to drive away demons: illness, especially epilepsy and madness, was considered the result of demonic possession.<sup>28</sup> Once again, a mandrake potion might cure Callimaco's lovesickness—although of course the potion is fictive and not intended for him. In addition,

<sup>24</sup> Mion, 128–30.

<sup>25</sup> See the discussion of Hippocrates, Demosthenes, and Apuleius in Mion, 128–30.

<sup>26</sup> Simoons, 107–11; Machiavelli, 2017, 201n24.

<sup>27</sup> Simoons, 120–25.

<sup>28</sup> Rahner, 240–41.

late medieval and early modern European folklore often considered mandrakes as having a supernatural ability to generate wealth: when Joan of Arc (ca. 1412–31) was accused of heresy, this included the use of mandrake to ensure her own wealth and success.<sup>29</sup> This magical power would have appealed to most of *Mandragola's* characters, especially the grasping and impecunious Ligurio, Fra' Timoteo, and Nicia.

According to Christian symbolism, the mandrake had a double or equivocal significance that is particularly apt for the ambiguous outcome of Machiavelli's *Mandragola*. The poisonous humanoid mandrake became symbolically life-giving after it was pulled from the earth, in its union with the head, Christ.<sup>30</sup> Saint Augustine compared the sweet scent of the mandrake with the "good reputation" that derives from an active public life;<sup>31</sup> this idea was reused by early Christian writers, leading to a range of other associations: the virtues of the saints, "which, like good physicians, cure souls of their sinful infirmities."<sup>32</sup> According to the eleventh-century mystic and polymath Hildegard von Bingen, the mandrake "grew from the same earth which formed Adam, and resembles the human a bit. Because of its similarity to the human, the influence of the devil appears in it and stays with it, more than with other plants. Thus, a person's good or bad desires are accomplished by means of it, just as happened formerly with the idols he made."<sup>33</sup> The equivocal nature of the mandrake reflects the imagined dual nature of the *pharmakon*, which could harm or heal. Mandrake potions, therefore, were simultaneously viewed as potent anesthetics and also associated with the redemption of the soul. Considering the mandrake's associations with fertility and wealth as well as good reputation and spiritual renewal, the root is an ideal focal point for a comedy that promotes secret adultery between young people in the eventual guise of a church-sanctioned relationship of *compare* (constant companion), which results in the woman's rejuvenation, the family's regeneration, and the financial advantage of those who assist in bringing this about.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Simoons, 111–12, 119.

<sup>30</sup> Rahner, 248.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, 2007, 337 (22.56).

<sup>32</sup> Rahner, 253; see also Simoons, 119–20.

<sup>33</sup> Hildegard von Bingen, 33. Machiavelli likely also had access to more recent medical books, including the fourteenth-century *Tacuinum sanitatis* (Maintenance of health), which promotes mandrake as an anesthetic, and the *Ricettario fiorentino* (Florentine book of prescriptions, originally published in 1498 by the Florentine Collegio dei Medici), which offers a mandrake recipe with likely anesthetic properties. Michele Savonarola's *Libreto de tutte le cosse che se magnano* (A booklet on all common foodstuffs, ca. 1450–52) includes mandrake in a cure-all recipe for prolonging life, curing paralysis and leprosy, and solving heart problems: Savonarola, 193.

<sup>34</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 72–75 (5.5–6).

Two ancient literary uses of mandrake are especially pertinent for readers of *Mandragola*. Commentators have long noted the similarities with an episode of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, a major source for Machiavelli's own *Asino* (The ass, ca. 1512–18). In Apuleius, a family tragedy is averted by means of a clever doctor's deception.<sup>35</sup> A married woman, lusting after a stepson who chastely avoids her attentions, decides to kill him with a poison sold to her servant by a doctor. By chance the woman's own son drinks the potion; she accuses the stepson of murdering his stepbrother and forcing himself on her. Before the blameless stepson is condemned to death, the doctor reveals the trick that he sold the woman's servant not poison, but a mandrake potion: he opens the tomb and the boy wakes up from a death-like sleep, turning tragedy into comedy. The father is reunited with two sons whom he had considered dead; the servant is crucified; the woman is banished; and the doctor is allowed to keep the gold paid for the fake poison. The combination of lust for a young and chaste object, deceiving doctors, fake potions, financial gain, a near death, and final resurrection has strong echoes in the plot of Machiavelli's *Mandragola*. As Martinez points out, "for Apuleius, the mandrake causes a false image of death that tricks the plot out of a tragic outcome; in Machiavelli's play, by contrast, the fiction of a lethal 'mandragola' masks the play's real virulence"—its critique of a corrupt Florence in which tragic catharsis is impossible.<sup>36</sup> There is never any real risk of death in Machiavelli's play, despite the fact that many characters seem to fear or court death. Martinez notes that, in *Mandragola*, the ancient Lucretia's tragic self-sacrifice as a motif of resisting corrupt tyrants (like the Visconti and the Medici) becomes the modern Lucrezia's complicit acceptance of corruption—with strong resonances for the newly restored Medicean Florence.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most significant literary use of mandrake for Machiavelli as statesman, author, and stage director appears in an episode of Plato's *Republic* that has not, to my knowledge, been highlighted as relevant for *Mandragola* or its author. In a passage remarkably reminiscent of Machiavelli's letters to Vettori during his exile, Socrates discusses the usefulness of the philosopher-statesman to society and emphasizes how little he is appreciated.<sup>38</sup> In Socrates's ship of state, the ship's master is feeble-eyed, hard of hearing, and has insufficient knowledge of navigation. The crew vies for control of

<sup>35</sup> Apuleius, 2:212–39 (book 10, chapters 1–12). See also Mion, 130; Palagi, 165–69.

<sup>36</sup> Martinez, 2000, 106.

<sup>37</sup> Martinez, 2000, 106–07.

<sup>38</sup> Plato, 2013, 2:18–23 (book 6, 488a–489c). See also Machiavelli's letters from this period (especially mid-1513 through 1514), in which erudite and deeply informed discussions of global politics are limned with moments of impotent despair that the author's knowledge is wasted. Machiavelli, 1961, esp. 262–370.



the ship and eventually takes over the vessel by drugging the shipmaster “with mandrake, or alcohol, or something else.”<sup>39</sup> They drink and feast and deplete the ship’s stores; Socrates invites us to imagine the voyage’s disastrous end. The true pilot—the philosopher-statesman who knows how to navigate and who opposes the others’ actions—is disparaged as “idle-talking and useless.”<sup>40</sup> Instead, the sailors honor as captain the man “who is clever enough to rally them to persuade or compel the master to let them rule”; that is, the one who leads the charge in drugging the shipmaster.<sup>41</sup> Socrates concludes his comparison by noting that those who fail to appreciate the philosopher-statesman’s knowledge are to blame: just as sick people should seek out a doctor, so too those who need to be governed must seek out a man who knows how to govern. Socrates elsewhere describes rulership as practiced by Asclepius, god of medicine and healing.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, there are frequent parallels between medicine and government in Ficino’s commentary on Plato’s *Republic* (published in 1491 with his collected works). Ficino warns that “if any art, such as the art of medicine, exacts a payment, it is not medicine (whose end is the healing of disease) insofar as it makes a profit, but it is entangled with gain and prostitution. The art of civil government, therefore, being the most complete of all the arts . . . governs without seeking any advantage for itself.”<sup>43</sup> Plato’s extended comparison with the marginalized philosopher-statesman who is like a doctor for the state, as well as Ficino’s disparagement of either doctoring or ruling for gain, must have resonated with Machiavelli the politician while he was writing *Mandragola* after his torture, imprisonment, and expulsion by the Medici—ruling bankers and merchants who were doctors in name only.

Reading *Mandragola* through the lens of Socrates’s parable, Ligurio and Callimaco appear similar to the cunning false pilot; each to some extent forces the feeble-eyed and ineffectual Nicia to let him rule, and for this receives the material appreciation of the other characters. The self-interest guiding the actions of Callimaco and Ligurio undoubtedly disqualifies them from the role of true pilot. *Mandragola*’s true pilot initially appears to be Lucrezia: famously described as “capable of governing a kingdom,” her clear-sighted wisdom obstructs the cuckolding plot.<sup>44</sup> As with Plato’s true pilot, Lucrezia’s

<sup>39</sup> Plato, 2013, 2:21 (book 6, 488c). Ficino follows imperial Latin usage in translating Plato’s *μανδραγόρα* as *mandragora* in Ficino, 1557, 410.

<sup>40</sup> Plato, 2013, 2:21 (book 6, 489a).

<sup>41</sup> Plato, 2013, 2:21 (book 6, 488c).

<sup>42</sup> Plato, 2013, 1:302–09 (book 3, 407c–408e).

<sup>43</sup> Ficino, 2009, 6.

<sup>44</sup> “Atta a governare un regno”: Machiavelli, 1980, 16 (1.3). Unless otherwise noted, translations from *Mandragola* are my own.

protests are disregarded by the other characters, and for her reluctance to cooperate she is considered “foolish” by her husband.<sup>45</sup> By the end of the play, constrained by the menace of *infamia*, Lucrezia submits to the designs of Ligurio and Callimaco.<sup>46</sup> Yet in contrast with Socrates’s parable, the tale of drugging and deception recounted in *Mandragola*’s metaphorical voyage appears to end happily, as decreed by comedy. It thus seems impossible to identify a true pilot in the play. Where Plato associates the mandrake with subversive loss of control and dangerously excessive feasting, *Mandragola* couples the pretense of the mandrake with the subversive assumption of control and the ability to feast literally and metaphorically, without restraint, while enjoying only pleasant consequences.

The parallels between doctors and statesmen in both Plato and Livy reflect the medical tradition that viewed the human body as a microcosm of society. By Machiavelli’s time, however, this paradigm was no longer entirely persuasive: most unusually, European medicine from the late thirteenth through early sixteenth centuries lacked a guiding principle for understanding the human body. According to medical historian Paul Unschuld, “For medicine, a convincing model image was missing of the real and ideal structures of society, a model image that could have lent plausibility to a new view of nature and then, in a third step, to a new view of the structures of the body and the organism.”<sup>47</sup> I argue that *Mandragola* offers an alternative view of bodily and societal structures: the play ridicules the fakery of the medical establishment and the spuriousness of respected cures like the fictive mandrake potion via a comic structure of society based on pure self-interest and signaled by the belly, Dante’s sign of fraud. Considering that the mandrake is a plant that has no head, it makes sense that the action of *Mandragola* is governed by the stomach. In Plato, Socrates aims at healing head and soul; the mandrake is associated with the failed ship of state and the public’s inability to appreciate the knowledge of the philosopher-statesman. By contrast, the medical discourse of Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* is largely concerned with the belly: the fictive mandrake potion allows for bodily and financial revitalization and the maintaining of the characters’ good reputation. The centrality of the imagined doctor and fake potion to the plot’s resolution ultimately undermines not only the idea of a physician’s knowledge but also the idea of truth itself.

#### THE POWER OF WORDS AND OF MEDICINE

Plato’s *Republic* insists that sick people should seek out a doctor who can heal them, yet his *Charmides* shows a fake doctor whose special words fail to heal

<sup>45</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 26 (2.5).

<sup>46</sup> See Tylus, esp. 672–73.

<sup>47</sup> Unschuld, 129–30.

Charmides's headaches. The problem of fakery in medicine was ever present for Machiavelli's contemporaries: following the *Invectiva contra Medicum* (Invective against the doctor, 1352–55) of Francesco Petrarca (1304–74) and the rise in outbreaks of incurable plague, there was a strong tradition of rhetoric against doctors as unscrupulous charlatans characterized by ignorance, greed, pallor, and excessive verbiage.<sup>48</sup> Machiavelli's *Asino*, written during the long composition of *Mandragola*, begins with an anecdote warning that “people have so much faith in doctors; and this is the only profession that seems to live and feed off the ills of others.”<sup>49</sup> Scholars have highlighted the critique of the ruling Medici family inherent in this account of a Florentine doctor's failure to heal, in which variations of the verbs *to promise* and *to believe* appear seven times over a mere ten lines (2.48–57): clearly, one should not believe the words of *medici* (doctors).<sup>50</sup>

In light of the connection between medicine and words in Plato, Christian teachings, and the *Asino*, it is significant that the play's prologue—despite declaring the title as *Mandragola*—emphasizes the power of words rather than of doctors or pharmaceuticals. Somewhat unusually for a theatrical production of this period, the first line of the prologue addresses the audience as *auditori* (listeners) instead of *spettatori* (spectators),<sup>51</sup> and then indicates that the author expects the audience to laugh and sneer at what they see or hear.<sup>52</sup> Curiously, the prologue attributes the current lack of *antica virtù* (ancient virtue or skill) to this problem: people no longer even attempt worthy deeds as they see how much “everyone speaks ill.”<sup>53</sup> The prologue warns the audience, however,

<sup>48</sup> See Park, 76–84. On Petrarch and medical skepticism, see Carlino. On the relation of the charlatan to Machiavelli's text, see Gurney.

<sup>49</sup> “A' medici si presta tanta fede, / . . . e questa sol tra l'altre sette / par che del mal d'altrui si pasca e viva”: Machiavelli, 2012, 142–43 (1.51–54). My translation.

<sup>50</sup> For scholarship highlighting the anti-Medicean critique, see Machiavelli, 2012, 142nn50–54; see also Ascoli and Capodivacca.

<sup>51</sup> As points of comparison, Bibbiena's *Calandria* (1513) addresses “spettatori,” as does Boiardo's *Timone* (published 1500, 1504, 1513, and twice in 1517): “spectatori.” Niccolò da Correggio's opening to the *Fabula de Cefalo* (1487) uses the verb *vedrete* (you will see) twice; Ariosto's *La Cassaria* (1508) employs the infinitive *vedere* (to see) while his *I suppositi* (1509) declares “siamo per farvi spettatori” (“we will make you [into] spectators”) and his *La Lena* (1528) states “vuol far spettacolo” (“it wishes to make a show”). Poliziano's *Orfeo* (ca. 1479, and thus from an earlier period) stands out in addressing its “benigni uditori” (“kindly listeners”).

<sup>52</sup> “Dicendo mal di ciò che vede o sente”: Machiavelli, 1980, 6.

<sup>53</sup> “Ognun biasma”: Machiavelli, 1980, 6.

that while they may malign the author and his work, he also knows how to “speak ill,” since this was his very first craft.<sup>54</sup> Tylus has convincingly read this as a threat that the author might defame the audience if it is unappreciative: already in the prologue, the author seems to be claiming knowledge of the audience’s secret or private activities, which makes him a dangerous man to cross.<sup>55</sup> The threat toward the audience, Tylus observes, parallels that made to Lucrezia.<sup>56</sup> The publicizing of knowledge, moreover, threatens several characters besides Lucrezia: Nicia fears reprisals if his negative assessment of Florentine society is attributed to him, and justice if the reason for the young scapegoat’s death becomes known;<sup>57</sup> Siro and Callimaco fear for their lives if the cuckolding plot is revealed;<sup>58</sup> and Fra’ Timoteo notes that secrecy is important to everyone involved.<sup>59</sup>

In a very strange sentiment for a play that depends on the recitation of specific words, the prologue’s final exhortation to the audience begins as follows, linking the power of words with the inability to tell the difference between being alive or dead: “One should not take words into account, nor take account of some stupid monster [*qualche mostro*] who perhaps doesn’t know if he’s still alive.”<sup>60</sup> While the “stupid monster” is usually understood as referring to Nicia, it will soon be clear that the epithet is equally applicable to Callimaco and even touches Lucrezia. The link between words and self-awareness, or words and the ability to distinguish between being alive or dead, suggests that discourse has the pharmaceutical value that Plato identified when he repeatedly suggested that words have a drug-like power to debilitate, numb, confuse, and disorient—or to heal.<sup>61</sup> In *Charmides*, Socrates insists that his cure of the soul is a verbal incantation which consists of “words of the right sort” (“lógos kalós”).<sup>62</sup> in Ficino’s translation, these are “preclaris rationibus,” meaning “outstanding judgments or reasoning.”<sup>63</sup> *Mandragola*’s apparent discrediting of words recalls

<sup>54</sup> “Sa dir male anch’egli, / e come questa fu la suo prim’arte”: Machiavelli, 1980, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Tylus, 681.

<sup>56</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 54 (4.2), 71 (5.4).

<sup>57</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 24–25 (2.3), 30 (2.6).

<sup>58</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 25 (2.4), 57 (4.5).

<sup>59</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 43 (3.9).

<sup>60</sup> “Far conto non si de’ delle parole, / né stimar qualche mostro, / che non sa forse s’ e’ s’è vivo ancora”: Machiavelli, 1980, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Rinella, 145–46. As Rinella points out, the pharmaceutical value of words is particularly evident in Plato’s *Charmides*, *Symposium*, *Meno*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Alcibiades I*, *Phaedo*, *Lysis*, and *Statesman*.

<sup>62</sup> Plato, 1927, 21 (157A).

<sup>63</sup> See Ficino, 1494 for the passage in full, which reads: “He teaches that there are certain incantations [enchantments/charms] that act as remedies for the soul. And these consist of

Augustine's dismissal of empty *verba*; and the linking of words with confusion between being alive and dead echoes Petrarch's condemnation of verbose doctors who kill while claiming to have the power to give life.<sup>64</sup>

The play includes much questioning of who is a doctor and the effectiveness of doctors' knowledge. This association between medicine and knowledge reflects the Platonic notion that knowledge was a remedy for the illness that was ignorance.<sup>65</sup> The honorific *dottore*—which could apply to both physicians and lawyers—and its relation to knowledge are questioned in the opening scene, where Callimaco remarks of Nicia: "Although he is a doctor [of law], he is the simplest and most foolish man in Florence."<sup>66</sup> Nicia, in discussing a proposed visit to thermal baths as suggested by Ligurio, says that each physician he has consulted recommends a different bathing spot; for this reason, he considers these doctors "parecchi ucellacci."<sup>67</sup> Mera Flaumenhaft translates this as "so many big fools," while Peter Constantine renders it as "a bunch of frauds."<sup>68</sup> For Machiavelli's highly educated audience, *uccellaccio*, the pejorative of *uccello* (bird), would recall Petrarch's medical analogy of the hoopoe, whose filthy habit of nesting in feces, Petrarch famously claimed, made him like the fraudulent and foul doctor who surrounded himself with excrement.<sup>69</sup> In any case, *uccellaccio* is an unexpected epithet here as it typically means "dupe" or more literally, a "carrion-eating bird": the victim rather than the perpetrator of a deception.<sup>70</sup> In fact, the servant Siro later labels Nicia himself a risible *uccellaccio* when he goes along with Ligurio and Callimaco's plan.<sup>71</sup> In the first act, then, Nicia presents himself as seeing through a larger unspecified fraud that the medical dupes are unable to discern: "To tell you the truth, these doctors of medicine have no idea what they're fishing up."<sup>72</sup> The lack of consensus among

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outstanding judgments or reasoning, by means of which temperance is conferred upon the soul. And when this [temperance] has been introduced and is present, it is easy to pass health along to the head and to the whole body."

<sup>64</sup> See especially Petrarca, 60–65 (2.77–79).

<sup>65</sup> See Rinella, 144.

<sup>66</sup> "Benché sia dottore, egli è el piú semplice ed el piú sciocco uomo di Firenze": Machiavelli, 1980, 12–13 (1.1); translation adapted from Machiavelli, 1981, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 15 (1.2).

<sup>68</sup> Machiavelli, 1981, 16; Machiavelli, 2007, 441.

<sup>69</sup> Petrarca, 72–75 (2.91–92).

<sup>70</sup> See *Vocabolario italiano*, 1248 (s.v. "uccellaccio").

<sup>71</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 26 (2.4).

<sup>72</sup> "A dirti el vero, questi dottori di medicina non sanno quello che si pescano": Machiavelli, 1980, 15 (1.2).

doctors was a common complaint against medical practitioners of the time, although doctors were more usually considered frauds than dupes.

After discounting the medical expertise of the genuine doctors—and expressing skepticism toward medical practitioners generally—Nicia is favorably impressed by the pretend doctor Callimaco. Nicia begins to develop a positive opinion as soon as Callimaco replies to his greeting in formal Latin: “Bona dies, domine magister” (“Good day, doctor”), says Nicia, to which Callimaco responds politely, “Et vobis bona, domine doctor” (“And to you, sir”).<sup>73</sup> Ligurio immediately asks Nicia what he thinks of this physician, and the reply is enthusiastically positive. Considering that Ligurio persuades Callimaco to present himself as a doctor in order to fool Nicia,<sup>74</sup> one might expect Callimaco to deploy a kind of double-entendre-laden fake Latin to mock this simpleton.<sup>75</sup> Surprisingly, Callimaco speaks entirely correct Latin complete with standard medical terms and diagnoses, offering a banal but grammatically and medically correct assessment of the couple’s sterility: “nam cause sterilitatis sunt: aut in semine, aut in matrice, aut in instrumentis seminariis, aut in virga, aut in causa extrinseca” (“for the causes of sterility are either in the semen, or in the womb, or in the seminal organs, or in the penis, or in an extrinsic cause”).<sup>76</sup> To this pronouncement, Nicia responds enthusiastically: “This fellow is the most worthy man one could find!”<sup>77</sup>

Again, when Callimaco comments on Lucrezia’s urine in act 2, scene 6, he does so in excellent Latin, telling Nicia not to be surprised that the specimen is cloudy: “Nam mulieris, urinae sunt semper maioris grossitiei et albedinis, et minoris pulchritudinis quam virorum. Huius autem, inter cetera, causa est amplitudo canalium, mixtio eorum quae ex matrice exeunt cum urinis” (“For the urine of women is always thicker, whiter, and less beautiful than that of men. Among other things, the reason is the large size of the canals, the mixture of things that leave the womb with the urine”).<sup>78</sup> Nicia’s delighted response is a clear comment on Callimaco’s Latin eloquence as well as on his own muddled (and implied homosexual) sense of the human body: “By the pussy of Saint

<sup>73</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 21 (2.2).

<sup>74</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 18 (1.3).

<sup>75</sup> For example, Aretino’s *Cortigiana* (1525) satirizes the pedantry of scholars by using Latin and Latinate expressions throughout. The tradition of satirizing learned doctors suggests that theatrical improvisation would allow for exaggerated fake Latin, perhaps even in Callimaco’s speeches to Nicia. Stoppelli observes that Callimaco’s medical discussions derive from Michele Savonarola’s *Practica maior* (Greater practice, 1479) in Machiavelli, 2017, 167n21.

<sup>76</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 22 (2.2); Machiavelli, 1981, 21n34.

<sup>77</sup> “Costui è il piú degno uomo che si possa trovare!": Machiavelli, 1980, 22 (2.2); Machiavelli, 1981, 22.

<sup>78</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 27 (2.6); translation adapted from Machiavelli, 1981, 24n40.

Puccio! This fellow's getting more and more subtle between my hands; see how well he discusses these things!"<sup>79</sup> In keeping with the tradition of invective against verbose doctors, Machiavelli ridicules both the medical profession and credulous patients by showing that Callimaco's eloquence in Latin is of paramount importance to Nicia. Following Callimaco's successful convincing of Nicia, Siro claims that Callimaco "has already become a doctor,"<sup>80</sup> even though Ligurio is the one who seems to be providing the remedy.

Ligurio's plan to unite Callimaco and Lucrezia is not merely medically sound; it is repeatedly described in terms of giving new life after the risk of death. Many scholars have pointed out that, in *Mandragola*, love is an illness that causes social chaos—as seen in the contrast between Callimaco's former balanced, productive life and his current state of inactivity and wild mood swings. As Callimaco himself points out, "it's better to die than to live like this."<sup>81</sup> The cure for lovesickness was sexual intercourse, with the traditional parallel between orgasm and death: Ligurio's remedy therefore solves Nicia and Lucrezia's quest for a child and also cures Callimaco's disease by discharging the excess humors that cause humoral imbalance and illness.<sup>82</sup> Callimaco foreshadows his own healing when he hears Ligurio's plan to fool Nicia, to which he responds with another sexual pun: "You're making me rise again [to new life]."<sup>83</sup> The parodically resurrected Callimaco even tells Ligurio that this news feeds him ("pascimi")—just like the Word of Christ resurrects and feeds the world.<sup>84</sup>

Ligurio's words are in fact a *pharmakon* with both positive and negative outcomes. At the end of act 2, Callimaco begs Ligurio not to leave him alone and then asks where Ligurio wants him to go now. Ligurio replies: "Over there, over here, this way, that way: Florence is so big," to which the paralyzed Callimaco says, miserably: "I'm dead."<sup>85</sup> With so many options and no explicit direction, Callimaco struggles not just to function, but even to live: he seems to be suffering from what Plato identified as the debilitating effects of excessive discourse. As Machiavelli's audience would have known, this kind of living death could also be produced by a mandrake potion. Callimaco again claims

<sup>79</sup> "Oh! uh! potta di San Puccio! Costui mi raffinisce in tralle mani; guarda come ragiona bene di queste cose!": Machiavelli, 1980, 27 (2.6). For the popular exclamation "potta di San Puccio," see Bonino's note in Machiavelli, 1980, 27n4.

<sup>80</sup> "È già diventato medico": Machiavelli, 1980, 25 (2.4).

<sup>81</sup> "Meglio è morire che vivere così": Machiavelli, 1980, 17 (1.3).

<sup>82</sup> For lovesickness across the ages, see B. Bynum.

<sup>83</sup> "Tu mi risusciti": Machiavelli, 1980, 19 (1.3).

<sup>84</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 19 (1.3).

<sup>85</sup> "Di là, di qua, per questa via, per quell'altra: egli è sí grande Firenze"; "Io son morto": Machiavelli, 1980, 31 (2.6).

that he's dying when Ligurio brings him news that the plan is going to work: "I'm dying of happiness!"<sup>86</sup> In response, Ligurio snidely points out, "Now from happiness, now from sadness, this fellow wants to die no matter what."<sup>87</sup> While this kind of comment is typical of comedic master-servant relationships, it clarifies that the prologue's epithet of a *mostro* (monster)—who does not know whether he is alive or dead—applies to Callimaco. Ligurio's words also have a revivifying effect on Nicia, when Ligurio announces that Fra' Timoteo is going to participate in the scheme. Nicia casts Ligurio in the role of miracle-working doctor: "You're remaking me, all of me. Will it be a boy?"<sup>88</sup> The clear double meaning here is that Ligurio has given new life to Nicia and is also re-creating Nicia by giving him a child. Like Plato's imagined Socrates in *Charmides*, and indeed like Christ himself, Ligurio appears to have the ability to heal through discourse.

In a further parody of God's healing Word, the administration of a *pharmakon* likewise seems to move Lucrezia from a state of semi-death to one of new life in the final moments of the play. Finally agreeing to the plan under pressure from her mother and the friar, Lucrezia, as a virtuous woman, fears imminent death: "I don't think I could possibly be alive tomorrow morning."<sup>89</sup> In this moment, she is convinced that the proposed adultery is a mortal sin; Lucrezia sees an indissoluble link between the health of her soul and her physical self, a ubiquitous notion from Plato onward. She remains unconvinced by the casuistry of the friar, who claims: "As far as the act itself goes, it's a fairytale to say it's a sin, because it's the will that sins, not the body; and the reason it's a sin is that it bothers the husband, but you're pleasing him—or taking pleasure in it, but you find it repugnant."<sup>90</sup> Here Machiavelli's elite audience might see a sly reference to Neoplatonic debates about sin made current during the late fifteenth century thanks to the translations of Ficino and Poliziano. While the Platonists argued that sin is voluntary and nobody rationally chooses to sin (rendering sin essentially impossible), Christian dogma distinguished between voluntary sins and accidental mistakes, punishing the former more severely.<sup>91</sup> Although the friar correctly refers to Augustine and other church fathers who determined that Livy's Lucretia was

<sup>86</sup> "Io ho a morire per l'alegrezza": Machiavelli, 1980, 52 (4.2).

<sup>87</sup> "Ora per l'alegrezza, ora pel dolore, costui vuole morire in ogni modo": Machiavelli, 1980, 52 (4.2).

<sup>88</sup> "Tu mi ricrii tutto quanto. Fia egli maschio?": Machiavelli, 1980, 42 (3.8).

<sup>89</sup> "Io non credo mai essere viva domattina": Machiavelli, 1980, 46 (3.11).

<sup>90</sup> "Quanto allo atto, che sia peccato, questo è una favola, perché la volontà è quella che pecca, non el corpo; e la cagione del peccato è dispiacere al marito, e voi li compiacete; pigliarne piacere, e voi ne avete dispiacere": Machiavelli, 1980, 45 (3.11).

<sup>91</sup> See Poliziano's mention of this reasoning in the preface to his translation of *Charmides* and the polemical response by the 1512 publisher, Josse Bade, in Hankins, 2:623, 627.



not guilty of adultery since she was raped, Fra' Timoteo's reasoning adheres more to the Platonic camp, to which Poliziano appears to belong in his preface to *Charmides*.<sup>92</sup> Of course, as Christ's representative on earth, the friar should be using words to heal Lucrezia's soul, but instead promotes a new life through the body rather than the soul.

Despite the friar's arguments, Lucrezia continues to see the *pharmakon* of intercourse as a poison administered by Fra' Timoteo and Sostrata—her confessor and her mother, precisely the characters who, in a tale of heroism, would be counted on to defend her virtue. Yet the adultery turns out to be a cure rather than a toxin, as Lucrezia is remarkably rejuvenated in the final act. Nicia intends to take her to church for purification since, as he says delightedly, “this morning you really seem to be reborn”—in strong contrast with her state the previous evening, when according to Nicia she appeared “half dead.”<sup>93</sup> Martinez has pointed out that Lucrezia's remarkable recovery is medically apt: a night with Callimaco “has purged her body of the noxious humors accumulated due to Nicia's neglect of his marital duties.”<sup>94</sup> As Martinez observes, these noxious humors would have troubled Lucrezia's urine, rendering it *cruda* (cloudy), as originally diagnosed by Callimaco.<sup>95</sup> According to Plato, Hippocrates, and much medieval medical theory, lack of intercourse would have caused Lucrezia's uterus to overheat and rise up through her body, threatening to suffocate other organs.<sup>96</sup> This ancient belief explains in medical terms the dramatic improvement in her energy and confidence in the final scenes of the play—in addition to the obvious understanding that Lucrezia is delighted with her new lover. The union of Lucrezia and Callimaco is thus an important corrective remedy for both characters.

### EATING, ELIMINATION, AND REMEDIES

The talk of dying and rebirth by Callimaco, Nicia, and Lucrezia evokes the mandrake's powers of both death and spiritual healing. It is therefore surprising that the major physical complaints in the play, which affect almost all the characters, are defined in terms of eating, digestion, and elimination. In the very first scene, Callimaco tells Siro that he's enlisted the help of Ligurio, who is

<sup>92</sup> For the specific parallels in Livy, 1:203 (1.58), see Martinez, 1983, 17–20. See also Augustine, 2012, 21–23 (1.19).

<sup>93</sup> “Gli è proprio, stamani, come se tu rinascessi”; “mezza morta”: Machiavelli, 1980, 73 (5.5).

<sup>94</sup> See Martinez, 1983, 22.

<sup>95</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 27 (2.6).

<sup>96</sup> For the late medieval persistence of this belief and its appearance in literary texts, see Cassell.

described with eight references to eating: Callimaco repeatedly uses the terms *mangiare* (to eat), *cena* (dinner), and *desinare* (to dine); Siro recalls Dante's discussion of fraud as he warns of the link between *pappatori*, men who eat too much (at others' expense), and deception or lack of faith.<sup>97</sup> Pasquale Stoppelli points out that Ligurio's name derives from the Latin verb *ligurare*, meaning "to lick," "to be fond of good things," or "to daintily feed upon."<sup>98</sup> Ligurio seems to be one of those "whose god is their belly," against whom Saint Augustine, following Saint Paul, warns his readers; by the end of the play, most of the characters correspond with this epithet.<sup>99</sup> As the plot of *Mandragola* evolves, it becomes clear who is eating at the expense of whom: while Ligurio and Fra' Timoteo concoct their plan together, Nicia says they've left him alone "like a fritter on a stick," a reference that is both phallic and gastronomic.<sup>100</sup> Even Fra' Timoteo describes cuckolding Nicia for the sake of an heir in terms of eating and sin. He assures Lucrezia that "obeying your husband in this matter need not prey more on your conscience than eating meat on a Wednesday, a sin that can be sprinkled away with a little holy water."<sup>101</sup> Wednesday was, at various times, a day of abstinence from meat in the church; meat was held responsible for raising the body's heat and so propitiating sexual desire. Eating meat was thus traditionally associated with adulterous passion;<sup>102</sup> Augustine in particular had closely associated inappropriate desire, food, and sex.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, by the final scene of the comedy, Lucrezia has the opportunity to eat meat, both literally and metaphorically, with Callimaco whenever she wishes.

Colloquialisms involving eating and elimination are of course very common in vernacular comedy. In light of the play's medical title, however, it is worth noting just how many times these expressions surface. In act 1, Ligurio ironically describes Nicia's not very impressive travels as having "pissed on so much snow."<sup>104</sup> The focus on urine expands across act 2, which begins with Nicia saying he will not be fooled by the doctor Callimaco: "He won't sell me

<sup>97</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 13 (1.1).

<sup>98</sup> Machiavelli, 2017, 149n40–44; Lewis, s.v. *ligūrio*.

<sup>99</sup> Augustine, 1997, 371 (13.39).

<sup>100</sup> "Come un zugo, a piuolo": Machiavelli, 1980, 41 (3.7). For the phallic reference, see Bonino's note in Machiavelli, 1980, 41n6.

<sup>101</sup> "Tanta coscienza vi è ottemperare in questo caso al marito vostro, quanto vi è mangiare carne el mercoledì, che è un peccato che se ne va con l'acqua benedetta": Machiavelli, 1980, 46 (3.11). This response reflects what Caroline Walker Bynum has considered a rather legalistic approach to Christian fasting in late medieval Europe: see C. W. Bynum, 31–69.

<sup>102</sup> Harper, 87.

<sup>103</sup> Augustine, 1997, 263–69 (10.41–48); Meilander.

<sup>104</sup> "Pisciato in tante neve": Machiavelli, 1980, 15–16 (1.2).

[empty] bladders.”<sup>105</sup> There follows much discussion of Lucrezia’s unwillingness to provide a urine specimen, signaling the still-absent wife’s astuteness in contrast with her husband’s credulity. The act ends with the presentation and analysis of Lucrezia’s urine in scene 6: Callimaco has literally sold Nicia an empty bladder.

Nicia and Callimaco in particular are repeatedly associated with problematic bowel movements. In act 2, Nicia tells Siro that he appreciates Callimaco’s medical knowledge but that the doctor should return to Paris since “here [in Florence] everyone’s a constipated shitter of sticks [*cacastecchi*]; nobody appreciates any kind of virtue or skill [*virtù*].”<sup>106</sup> Nicia relates his own academic study to similar stomach problems: “I know what I’m talking about, since I crapped out my guts to learn a couple of aitches.”<sup>107</sup> When Nicia hears about the proposed mandrake potion and its imagined effects on the first man to have intercourse with Lucrezia after she takes it, his response is again bowel-related: “Cacasangue!” he says, translated as “blood-crap,” a reference to dysentery rather than a generic exclamation.<sup>108</sup> Nicia again exclaims “Cacasangue!” when Ligurio tells Fra’ Timoteo that Nicia and another gentleman would like to donate hundreds of ducats for alms.<sup>109</sup> Ronald L. Martinez, Konrad Eisenbichler, and others have pointed out that Nicia’s obsession with feces suggests a homosexuality that offers a reason besides impotence for his lack of a child.<sup>110</sup> While this is certainly true, the feces references are part of a larger discourse within the play around eating, elimination, and disease—all of which have to do with the belly, the locus of base desires.

Callimaco’s desire for Lucrezia likewise affects his *viscere*.<sup>111</sup> One could translate *viscere* as “innards” or even as “innermost heart,” except that Callimaco also claims that he’s losing ten pounds each hour—a claim that, if true, would signal severe dysentery.<sup>112</sup> When Callimaco declares that “le viscere si commuovono,” he suggests (in Constantine’s translation) that “my innards are rattled” as well as loose bowels.<sup>113</sup> Yet stomach trouble is not typical of love-induced furor: the traditional symptoms are erratic pulse, pallor, mood

<sup>105</sup> “A me non venderà egli vesciche”: Machiavelli, 1980, 20 (2.1).

<sup>106</sup> “In questa terra non ci è se non cacastecchi, non ci si apprezza virtù alcuna”: Machiavelli, 1980, 24 (2.3).

<sup>107</sup> “Io ne so ragionare, che ho cacato le curatelle per imparare dua hac”: Machiavelli, 1980, 24 (2.3).

<sup>108</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 29 (2.6); see Bonino’s note in Machiavelli, 1980, 29n16.

<sup>109</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 37 (3.4).

<sup>110</sup> Martinez, 1983, 35–36; Eisenbichler.

<sup>111</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 50 (4.1).

<sup>112</sup> “Io scemo ad ogni ora dieci libre”: Machiavelli, 1980, 56 (4.4).

<sup>113</sup> Machiavelli, 2007, 465.

swings, and appetite changes. The close involvement of Callimaco's *viscere* in this love sickness, to the extent of extreme weight loss (even if only for the sake of hyperbolic rhetoric), again underlines the importance of the belly. In fact, Callimaco's self-described diarrhea and delirium—in which his legs shake, his arms and tongue seem paralyzed, his head spins, and his eyes are dazed<sup>114</sup>—are also symptoms of mandrake poisoning.

These many stomach problems clearly require a cure: a close look at the remedies offered sheds light on *Mandragola's* medical framing. Despite the play's title, and despite much scholarly discussion of the mandrake, there is a dramatic difference between the imagined *mandragola* potion and the actual hippocras that Callimaco says he is sending to Lucrezia. Hippocras was spiced and sweetened mulled wine commonly used as a digestive.<sup>115</sup> Callimaco and Nicia would clearly benefit from taking hippocras. Nicia shows his suspicion of the medical establishment when he initially rejects both the idea of the mandrake potion and also, by his choice of words, the actual drink of hippocras. Nicia's initial response to the mandrake plan is to declare that he "does not want" it: "Io non voglio cotesta suzzacchera!" with *suzzacchera* meaning both "rubbish" and, literally, "a drink of sugar and vinegar"—which is essentially what Lucrezia takes.<sup>116</sup>

Ligurio nonetheless provides a pharmaceutical remedy specifically for the reluctant Nicia, who refuses even to imagine that he is at fault in the failure to produce an heir.<sup>117</sup> When Ligurio, Nicia, Fra' Timoteo, and Siro are disguised and out in the street to catch a supposed unsuspecting young lad (Callimaco), Ligurio claims that he has given the fictive Callimaco (Fra' Timoteo) hazelnuts to hold in his mouth and disguise his voice.<sup>118</sup> The hazel tree symbolized "lasciviousness" for Hildegard von Bingen, who prescribed a recipe based on hazelnuts for men whose semen does not engender children.<sup>119</sup> The Vienna *Tacuinum sanitatis* (Maintenance of health, ca. 1380–99) likewise recommended hazelnuts for the cold and decrepit.<sup>120</sup> Of course, we know not to trust Ligurio, even when he claims to have given the friar hazelnuts, but as a *pharmakon* (real or imagined), hazelnuts suggest that Ligurio seeks to engender carnal desire and activity in Fra' Timoteo, promoting new life through the body rather than the soul. Hazelnuts might also indicate that the friar is prone to unfulfilled sexual longing, in which case Ligurio is helping him achieve his

<sup>114</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 50 (4.1).

<sup>115</sup> Henisch, 105.

<sup>116</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 29 (2.6).

<sup>117</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 22 (2.2).

<sup>118</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 61 (4.9).

<sup>119</sup> Hildegard von Bingen, 114.

<sup>120</sup> *Tacuinum sanitatis*, fol. xij<sup>r</sup>.

desires. In response to Nicia's angry reaction that he too should have hazelnuts, Ligurio instead offers what he says is a ball of wax to hold in his mouth and disguise his voice. Beeswax, still known today for its therapeutic and antimicrobial properties, was then the basis of a range of ointments and was widely used for treating ailments including hemorrhoids, burns, and wounds; in the mouth, Hippocrates famously prescribed beeswax to cure purulent tonsillitis.<sup>121</sup> Therapeutic if unnecessary, a ball of wax would certainly disguise Nicia's voice.

Instead of either hazelnuts or wax, however, Ligurio actually gives Nicia aloe. Rather than disguising Nicia's voice, this *pharmakon* emphasizes what he has been talking about all along, as the bitter taste makes him sound like a child talking about the toilet: "Ca, pu, ca, co, che, cu, cu, spu. . . . Ca, ca, pu, pu."<sup>122</sup> This is an appropriate verbal response, since aloe is a strong purgative, traditionally so effective at curing chronic constipation that it was also known to produce hemorrhoids.<sup>123</sup> Nicia's large dose of aloe thus respects the Dantean law of *contrappasso*, with the punishment fitting Nicia's suggested crime of homosexuality.<sup>124</sup> His bitter medicine indeed seems to work as a punishment, unlike the comedy's other more pleasant remedies: Fra' Timoteo's hazelnuts; the hippocras that Callimaco sends Lucrezia; and the simultaneous feasts of lovemaking (the cure for Callimaco's furor, Lucrezia's cloudy urine, and the lack of a child) and eating (the meal that sates the hunger of Siro and Ligurio who, Fra' Timoteo notes, have not eaten all day).<sup>125</sup>

The servants' literal feasting as well as Callimaco and Lucrezia's metaphorical sexual feast have a rejuvenating effect. This eating contrasts strongly with Nicia's wishful food-related description of Callimaco, the putatively unknown young man who is put into bed with Lucrezia. Nicia examines the man's body, noting that he has "the most beautiful flesh: white, soft, smooth as dough [*pastoso*]!"<sup>126</sup> Despite its root in *pasta*, *pastoso* does not necessarily refer to food. Nicia, however, develops the food metaphor when he explains why he examined the man's body so closely: "Since I'd already put my hand in the dough [*pasta*], I wanted to touch the bottom of it"; the phrase appears in the Constantine translation as: "I'd already poked my finger into the pie, so there was no reason not to check the filling."<sup>127</sup> Nicia says that he struggled to get the

<sup>121</sup> See Lev; Fratini et al.

<sup>122</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 61 (4.9).

<sup>123</sup> See Haller.

<sup>124</sup> On "cures" and punishments for homosexuality, see Camille, 74–78. On homosexuality, natural philosophy, and medical science, see Cadden.

<sup>125</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 64 (4.10).

<sup>126</sup> "Le più belle carne: bianco, morbido, pastoso!": Machiavelli, 1980, 67 (5.2).

<sup>127</sup> "Poi che io avevo messo mano in pasta, io ne volli toccare el fondo": Machiavelli, 1980, 68 (5.2); translation from Machiavelli, 2007, 477.

young man out of bed afterwards since “he liked the lard so much”—or, as Constantine translates it, “he was lying there like a roast pig in its own juice.”<sup>128</sup> Just as Nicia wishes in vain for hazelnuts, he envisages Callimaco’s body as a delicious meal to be consumed but remains the character who does not get to feast, only to imagine doing so. Nicia’s longing for such food recalls Dante’s punishment of the gluttons in *Purgatorio* 22. The collective punishment of *Purgatorio*, however, yields redemption; by contrast, Nicia hungers alone while the other characters’ unrestrained feasting gives them new life.

*Mandragola*’s final resolution includes everyone going to dine together, a social ritual that signals the happy restoration of healthy norms following Callimaco’s inability to eat and his symptoms of dysentery; Lucrezia’s cloudy urine and unwillingness to empty her bladder; Ligurio’s prolonged hunger and obsession with eating; and Nicia’s fixation with feces, his ingestion of a purgative, and his longing description of Callimaco’s body as food. Nicia invites Callimaco and Ligurio to eat with him and his wife;<sup>129</sup> and, in the closing speech, Fra’ Timoteo reiterates the dinner plans of the other characters (“you’re going to eat too”), before turning to the audience and sending them on their way—presumably also to eat after the show.<sup>130</sup>

The centrality of healthy eating to the final resolution recalls millennia of analogies between the human body and the state. In Livy, Menenius Agrippa manages to produce accord between the plebs and the patricians via his fable of the belly: the various sections of the body “thought it unfair that they should have the worry and the trouble and the labour of providing everything for the belly, while the belly remained quietly in their midst with nothing to do but to enjoy the good things which they bestowed upon it.”<sup>131</sup> Following their conspiracy not to feed the belly, they themselves wasted away until they realized that the belly in fact did important work for all of them. This notion of the body politic as a set of potentially harmonious parts—and, in particular, the relationship between the plebian belly and the ruling head—is a persistent theme in Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*. In discussing the ancient Roman kings as heads of the body politic, Machiavelli points out that their corruption was prevented from spreading through all the other parts of the body: “It was to Rome’s great happiness that those kings became corrupt quickly, so that they were

<sup>128</sup> “E’ gli era piaciuto l’unto”: Machiavelli, 1980, 69 (5.2); translation from Machiavelli, 2007, 477. Nicia worries about the effects of the night on the young man, but Ligurio tells him—accurately—that the man will find his own cure for the problem: “Lasciatene la cura a lui”: Machiavelli, 1980, 69 (5.2).

<sup>129</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 74 (5.6).

<sup>130</sup> “Ne andrete a desinare a vostra posta”: Machiavelli, 1980, 75 (5.6).

<sup>131</sup> Livy, 1:325 (*Ab urbe condita* 2.32).

driven out before their corruption passed into the bowels of that city.”<sup>132</sup> *Mandragola* presents the audience with a city whose bowels are already corrupted: as noted above, Nicia complains that Florence has only *cacastecchi* (constipated shitters of sticks) and nobody appreciates any kind of virtue.<sup>133</sup> *Mandragola*'s sustained discourse about food (both literal and metaphorical) and feces offers us a society governed not by the head, but by the belly, the seat of base desires. As I have already observed, the character most closely associated with hunger and eating, Ligurio, is also the one who often appears to be directing the action. While Ligurio uses drugs and blandishments to steer Socrates's ship of state toward intemperate feasting, he also offers a set of remedies for the problems ailing Nicia, Callimaco, and Lucrezia.

The extended emphasis on food and digestion in a context of deception recalls Dante's *Inferno*, where (as Robert Durling has elaborated) the circles of fraud represent the belly of Satan. Dante's text continually mentions digestive illnesses and problematic food, since fraud is the opposite of truth, which nourishes like healthy food. Machiavelli's own *Esortazione alla penitenza* (Exhortation to penitence, n.d.) had warned against allowing the mouth, “which is made for nourishment,” to become “a sewer, or a pathway to satisfy the appetite and the belly with sophisticated and unnecessary foods.”<sup>134</sup> In this warning, Machiavelli seems to be following Augustine's admonitions against enjoying both food and sex too much.<sup>135</sup> *Mandragola* insists repeatedly on digestive illnesses, medicine, and eating; yet healthy eating happens only through the adultery and deception that continue beyond the bounds of the text, in a direct inversion of Augustine's teachings and Dante's punishment of fraud.

Given the application of appropriate remedies across the play, it is curious that the only medical problem that has nothing to do with the stomach remains unsolved. Toward the end of act 4, Fra' Timoteo complains of a headache: “I'm going to have a rest; my head is hurting so much that I'm dying.”<sup>136</sup> This headache strikes the friar immediately after the cuckolding is irrevocably set in motion, when the supposedly unknown young man (Callimaco) is caught

<sup>132</sup> “Però fu felicità grande quella di Roma, che questi re diventassero corrotti acciò ne fussono cacciati, e innanzi che la loro corruzione fusse passata nelle viscere di quella città”: Machiavelli, 2001, 1:109–10 (1.17.12); translation from Machiavelli, 1996, 48.

<sup>133</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 24 (2.3).

<sup>134</sup> “La bocca, donde si ha a nutrire, la fa diventare una cloaca e una via per sodisfare allo appetito e al ventre con delicati e superflui cibi”: Machiavelli, 2012, 413. On the dating and attribution of the *Esortazione*, see the introductory note by Emanuele Cutinelli-Rèndina in Machiavelli, 2012, 403–09.

<sup>135</sup> Augustine, 1997, 263–69 (10.41–48).

<sup>136</sup> “Io m'andrò a riposare, ché mi duole la testa, che io muoio”: Machiavelli, 1980, 63 (4.9).

and sent inside to have sex with Lucrezia. It would be easy to read the headache as an attack of conscience or a sickness in the soul, since the head was typically considered the seat of the soul. Ironically enough, either a real mandrake potion or a drink of hippocras should fix Fra' Timoteo's headache. Yet despite the evident medical knowledge of both Callimaco and Ligurio, no remedy is supplied or even suggested. Another headache that is famously never resolved is that of Plato's Charmides: the fake doctor Socrates says that his headaches require a *pharmakon* for the soul, but the discussants fail to find one.

### DOCTORS AND DISGUISE

Callimaco's disguise as a doctor is both more convincing and more puzzling than scholarship has noted. As Callimaco explains the medical use of hippocras, he starts to sound like the kind of doctor who should be able to cure the problem: Ligurio asks, "Hai tu ad ordine la pozione?" This could mean "Do you have the potion ready?"—or, in Bonino's reading, "Have you prepared the potion and do you have it ready?"<sup>137</sup> Callimaco responds "Sì, ho," meaning either "Yes, I have it" or "Yes, I have done it." Considering that Ligurio seems to be in command of the situation, it is curious that he asks Callimaco: "What [potion] will you send [to Nicia for Lucrezia]?" Callimaco replies: "A cup of hippocras, which helps to settle the stomach and cheer the brain."<sup>138</sup> Callimaco sounds knowledgeable and in charge—but at this point he gives up control of the discussion and breaks off into nonsensical yelping as he realizes that he cannot catch the young male scapegoat and also be the young male scapegoat: "Ohimè, ohimè, ohimè, i' sono spacciato!"<sup>139</sup> This might be translated as "Oh no, oh no, oh no, I'm doomed!" *Spacciato* comes from *spacciare*, to pass off or sell dishonestly; *spacciato* was also a medical epithet for patients who would not recover.<sup>140</sup> All of these meanings apply here as Callimaco seems doomed while he himself has been passed off as a doctor, with a drug-like effect on Nicia.

I would argue that Callimaco is a surprisingly plausible doctor: he speaks medical Latin, analyzes urine, prescribes potions, and is a verbose, unhealthy immigrant. Tessa Gurney has compared him with the increasingly popular *cerretani* or *ciarlatani* who masqueraded as doctors.<sup>141</sup> Callimaco himself

<sup>137</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 52 (4.2); see Bonino's note in Machiavelli, 1980, 52n13.

<sup>138</sup> "Che li manderai?" "Un bicchiere d'ipocrasso, che è a proposito a racconciare lo stomaco, rallegra el cervello": Machiavelli, 1980, 52 (4.2).

<sup>139</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 52 (4.2).

<sup>140</sup> See *Vocabolario italiano*, 1151 (s.v. "spacciare").

<sup>141</sup> Gurney, esp. 3–14. Gurney's analysis imputes to Callimaco a degree of agency that the character does not consistently display in the comedy. Instead, Callimaco seesaws between lucid control and being the passive puppet of Ligurio.



mentions the spectre of the charlatan, saying to Nicia: “I wouldn’t want them to think me a charlatan.”<sup>142</sup> Yet Callimaco not only uses standard medical Latin in analyzing Lucrezia’s urine but also shows clear medical and pharmacological expertise when discussing the potion with Ligurio—for whom Callimaco presumably does not have to put on a performance. Native Florentine physicians were increasingly hard to find, since medicine in the wake of the Black Death was such a hazardous profession; immigrants were increasingly filling this professional gap.<sup>143</sup> Considering that Callimaco has just arrived from Paris, the claim that he is a doctor is quite credible. In addition to the association of this provenance with the *mal francese* (syphilis, literally the “French ill,” closely linked with the French following their 1494 invasion), Callimaco’s love sickness makes him pale, unhealthy, and garrulous—characteristics that perfectly fit the medical stereotype.

While Ligurio seems to be in charge much of the time, Callimaco seems to be a doctor much of the time. In introducing the primary mechanism of the plot, Ligurio tells Callimaco that Nicia has asked him to find a doctor who will tell him which baths to visit with his wife. He continues, “I want you to do it my way, and that’s to say that you have studied medicine and have had some experience in Paris; he’ll easily believe it because of his simplicity and because you’re educated and can say something to him in Latin.”<sup>144</sup> Callimaco cautiously asks for the reasoning behind this idea before agreeing to the plan. From their exchange, it is not clear whether or not Callimaco has studied medicine, merely that he is in a position to be able to say that he has done so. Ligurio’s logic—that Nicia will not make inquiries about Callimaco’s qualifications—depends to a large degree on the brevity of the time span involved: “Even if Messer Nicia were a clever enough man—which he isn’t—to check whether or not you’re a doctor, the short time span and the thing itself will ensure that he won’t have enough time to consider it or, even if he does, that he won’t have enough time to ruin our plan.”<sup>145</sup> Yet at the end of the play the deception is extended indefinitely, with Callimaco invited to dine with Nicia and Lucrezia as their new *compare*.<sup>146</sup> This ending implies both that

<sup>142</sup> “Io non vorrei che mi tenessino un cerretano”: Machiavelli, 1980, 23 (2.2).

<sup>143</sup> For the medical profession and the lack of Florentine doctors, see Park, 80–84.

<sup>144</sup> “Io voglio che tu faccia a mio modo, e questo è che tu dica di avere studiato in medicina, e che abbi fatto a Parigi qualche sperienza: lui è per crederlo facilmente per la semplicità sua, e per essere tu litterato e poterli dire qualche cosa in gramatica”: Machiavelli, 1980, 18 (1.3); translation from Machiavelli, 1981, 18.

<sup>145</sup> “E quando e’ fussi uomo che non è, da ricercare se tu se’ o non se’ medico, la brevità del tempo, la cosa in sé farà o che non ne ragionerà o che non sarà a tempo a guastarci el disegno, quando bene e’ ne ragionassi”: Machiavelli, 1980, 18–19 (1.3); translation adapted from Machiavelli, 2007, 443.

<sup>146</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 73–75 (5.6).

Callimaco is in a position to maintain his public pose as a doctor and that he will continue indefinitely to supply Lucrezia with a remedy that can “settle the stomach and cheer the brain.”<sup>147</sup>

It is impossible to know whether or not Callimaco is in fact a doctor. While the other characters recognize all the attributes of a plausible medical professional, one assumes, as a reader of the play and of Machiavelli more broadly, that he is not a doctor. Yet Callimaco clearly has basic medical knowledge—or can fake basic medical knowledge. This is the crux of the play’s critique of doctors: the impossibility, for both the characters and the reader, of distinguishing between real and false medical knowledge suggests that there is no difference between a charlatan and a qualified medical professional.

The impossibility of discerning real doctors from fake ones recalls a central problem of Plato’s *Charmides*. After some discussion about the nature of *sophrosūne* and its relation to knowledge, Socrates hypothesizes ironically that the man characterized by *sophrosūne* “will be able to distinguish neither the man who pretends to be a doctor, but is none, from the man who really is one, nor any other man who has knowledge from him who has none.”<sup>148</sup> This remark is especially pointed since Socrates is pretending to be a doctor, claiming that he will cure Charmides’s headaches. Yet Socrates’s apparent medical masquerade, like that of Callimaco, is entirely plausible: he has just returned from a military campaign where he claims to have learned (from a Thracian physician of Zalmoxis) about curing the whole in order to cure the part, starting with the soul.<sup>149</sup> Socrates asserts that he gave his oath to this physician not to attempt to heal anyone’s head without first treating his soul with those “words of the right sort” that constitute a healing charm.<sup>150</sup> As with Machiavelli’s Callimaco, it is impossible to distinguish which (if any) of Socrates’s claims of medical knowledge might be false.

<sup>147</sup> Machiavelli, 1980, 52 (4.2).

<sup>148</sup> Plato, 1927, 71 (170E). *Charmides* highlights the difficulty of defining *sophrosūne* within ancient Greek culture: this problem is exacerbated in interpretations both today and in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Christian culture. Liddell and Scott’s modern translation of *sophrosūne* is “soundness of mind, prudence, discretion”; in philosophical conversations this often consists in self-control. Liddell and Scott’s secondary definition is “moderation in sensual desires, self control, temperance”: Liddell and Scott, 1751. As noted by John Arthos, Ficino translates *sophronūse* as *temperantia*: see Arthos, 266. The Loeb translation of *Charmides* and the Fardell translation of Ficino’s “Summary of *Charmides*” use “temperance.” See Plato, 1927; Ficino, 2006. My discussion of *Charmides* is deeply indebted to North, 150–96; see also Clark.

<sup>149</sup> Plato, 1927, 18–23 (156D–157C).

<sup>150</sup> Plato, 1927, 21 (157A).

A large part of *Charmides* centers on the knowledge of knowledge and the value of such knowledge: how do we know that we know something, and why does it matter? Socrates seems to suggest that there are no answers to these questions. Commentators have, however, argued that *Charmides* does offer answers regarding the nature of *sophrosūne*. Justin C. Clark has taken close account of the work's extended discussions of both medicine and knowledge to argue that, in *Charmides*, "temperance is a knowledge of good and bad (*health* and *sickness*) in the soul."<sup>151</sup> While this hypothesis offers a convincing account of the dialogue's arguments and their staging, Socrates declares the search for the *pharmakon* of temperance a categorical failure. Yet this failure does not merely produce continued headaches, or the disappointment of a fruitless rhetorical exercise: decades after the setting of the dialogue in 432 BCE, Charmides and Critias became brutal autocrats who epitomized a lack of *sophrosūne* and the imbalance between aristocrats and populace. Critias was one of the Thirty Tyrants who ruled Athens at the end of the fifth century after the Peloponnesian War; Charmides (also in government during the reign of the Thirty) was killed during the restoration of Athenian democracy. Athenians in the early fourth century would have remembered the conspicuous lack of self-restraint of both figures, as would attentive Renaissance readers of Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, and Plutarch.<sup>152</sup> Rather than being the head of state, both Charmides and Critias were more like the irrational and greedy belly. Socrates as physician failed to find a cure through words; violence ultimately purged the state of these two tyrants.

Machiavelli's response to Socrates's inability to cure the corruption of his pupils is a healing process that inverts both Platonic and Christian medical discourse: *Mandragola* takes corruption into account by separating out the health of the body from the health of the soul. In this way, Lucrezia's capitulation in *Mandragola* suggests that resistance on spiritual or moral grounds is futile; complicity, on the other hand, can bring pleasure, personal gain, and bodily health. According to Livy's fable of the belly, a balance must be maintained between the various members of the corporate state. In Machiavelli's *Discorsi*, a state must be purged of disease, ideally before corruption reaches the bowels: vice must be destroyed in order for the state to regain health. Yet *Mandragola*'s action and resolution revolve around supplying the *viscere* with their desires, irrespective of any consideration of Platonic or Christian self-restraint. As with the mandrake root, there is no head or soul; there is not even clearly identifiable knowledge, only visceral needs. Discursively signaled by the insistence

<sup>151</sup> Clark, 19 (italics in original).

<sup>152</sup> See Plato, 1929, 478–79 (*Epistle VII* 324D); Aristotle, 100–115 (*Athenian Constitution* 34–40); Xenophon, 87–171 (*Hellenica* book 2); Plutarch, 110–13 (*Alcibiades* 38).

on eating, digestion, and scatology, Machiavelli's answer to the problem posed by *Charmides* is a tongue-in-cheek intervention not only in the discourse of healing—body and soul—but also in the discourse of knowledge more broadly.

*Mandragola* shows a doctor or doctors who may or may not have medical knowledge, who profess truths that may or may not be true, and who offer remedies that may or may not be the remedies they claim to be—since the knowledge of knowledge is impossible to know. While Dante tried to separate out healing truth and nutrition from harmful fraud and feces, *Mandragola* suggests that this distinction is a question of perspective. Indeed, Machiavelli would have been well aware that Dante himself adopted the trappings of a doctor who attempted in vain to cure the state of Florence: despite a lack of medical knowledge, Dante famously joined the Guild of Doctors and Apothecaries (L'Arte dei Medici e Speziali) so as to be eligible for governmental office; his Florentine political career ended, like Machiavelli's, in ignominious exile. As with Callimaco, Socrates, and Dante, it is ultimately impossible to know whether or not the current rulers of Florence are true doctors—whether they are *medici* or just Medici.

*Mandragola's* repeated medical rhetoric; the play's insistence on doctors, eating, elimination, coming alive, and dying; and the characters' inability to tell the difference between being alive and dead, or between real doctors and fake doctors, suggests a serious condemnation of the idea of knowledge as based on objective discernible truth. If for Dante truth is food for the soul and constitutes a relation between signs and things, *Mandragola* collapses the distinction between nourishing truth and harmful deceit, rendering moot the idea of nourishment for the soul.<sup>153</sup> By breaking down the relationship between signs and things, the play calls into question the idea of truth as a basis of knowledge. If it is impossible to know what is real, then there is no difference between words and the Word: excellent rhetoric (the *preclare rationes* of Ficino's Plato) is indistinguishable from *verba*, the new *pharmakon*. While Machiavelli's *Principe* famously declares its adherence to the *verità effettuale* (the effective or actual truth), *Mandragola* suggests that this is whichever *verità* has an effect.<sup>154</sup> The true doctor is Augustine's despised "seller of words," the one whose rhetoric transforms the simple drink of hippocras into a dangerous and powerful mandrake potion.

<sup>153</sup> On Dante, see Durling, 61–66.

<sup>154</sup> Machiavelli, 1995, 102 (15.3).

## CODA: KNOWLEDGE, MEDICINE, AND TRUTH

*Mandragola*'s profound questioning of what constitutes medical knowledge, or healing truth, encapsulated much larger debates emerging across Europe regarding knowledge acquired from ancient sources or via observation, as well as debates concerning Christian truth. In *Mandragola*, both truth and knowledge depend on individual interpretation—a notion that would be fundamental to Reform ideas, which would in turn influence many branches of knowledge.<sup>155</sup> From Erasmus's satire of scientific learning in *Moriae encomium* (Praise of folly, 1511) to Ariosto's parody of educating the prince to virtue in *Orlando furioso* (1516–32), the interrelated concepts of learning, knowledge, and truth were being scrutinized in the early decades of the sixteenth century. Fifteenth-century readers had confronted the reality that the great authoritative texts existed only in corrupted form: even the works of Cicero and Aristotle required attentive study rather than immediate acceptance as truth. Thus emerged a perplexing awareness that the knowledge one acquires from books might not always coincide with truth. Worse still, even accurate knowledge from books might not be useful: the humanist project of using classical texts to educate the prince toward self-restraint was increasingly seen as flawed or failed, especially following the French invasion of 1494 and the ensuing Italian wars.<sup>156</sup>

*Mandragola* takes issue with the idealism of the previous generation of humanists including Ficino, the physician, priest, and scholar of Plato who, in Lorenzo de' Medici's Florence, had popularized the idea of the philosopher as a doctor of souls. *Mandragola* not only criticizes Plato's *Charmides* and the ancient emphasis on teaching self-restraint, but also mocks the courtly Neoplatonism spurred by Pietro Bembo's *Asolani* (1505), which disseminated notions of ideal beauty and love as leading to the divine. While Machiavelli's *Prince* spotlights the problem of applying ancient knowledge to modern politics, *Mandragola* parodies the notion of teaching self-restraint, and refutes the Christianizing and Neoplatonic idea of a hidden unitary truth.

*Mandragola*'s emphasis on the material pleasures of eating—in defiance of traditional, religiously inflected rhetoric around food—moreover reflects a new emphasis on experience and observation in all branches of knowledge, including the conceptualization of food and medicine. Abandoning the traditional Christian framework for discussing food, Platina's *De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine* (On right pleasure and good health, ca. 1470) combined personal experience with classical and Arabic sources to offer advice on healthy eating.<sup>157</sup> Flouting the Galenic hierarchy of foods, sixteenth-century Italian literary

<sup>155</sup> See Harrison.

<sup>156</sup> See the seminal work of Hampton, 1990.

<sup>157</sup> See Mary Ella Milham, "Platina's Originality," in Platina, 56–59.

discussions rehabilitated salads as acceptable and desirable for all, not just the lower orders of society.<sup>158</sup> This focus on lived experience was gaining importance: Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), hailed as a genius in his own time, advocated investigation and visual observation over book learning. At the same time, empirical knowledge remained deeply controversial, even for doctors: the sixteenth-century medic Leonardo Fioravanti (1517–ca. 1583) has been considered both a brilliant empiricist and also a charlatan who worked outside official channels.<sup>159</sup>

Yet *Mandragola* proposes that even knowledge based on visual observation is not necessarily true, and further suggests that we have no way of ascertaining truth. The radical skepticism implicit in Machiavelli's comedy was amplified later in the century, perhaps most famously by Michel de Montaigne (1533–92). Rabelais's *Pantagruel* (1532) directly engaged with some of *Mandragola*'s ideas, parodying both the idea that words can heal, and the notion of a universal knowledge based on visual observations. *Pantagruel* claims that its physical pages are medicinal and lampoons the idea of medical knowledge with the fable of the lion who tries to help a fainting woman: the lion sees the old woman's genitals as a wound, since he himself is wounded.<sup>160</sup> As Timothy Hampton has argued, the lion's diagnosis and well-meaning cure (beating her imagined wound with the fox's tail and stuffing it with moss) in fact violate and vilify the woman.<sup>161</sup> Like the enigmatic resolution of *Mandragola*, this anecdote negates the Augustinian idea that divine illumination, in addition to visual observation, allows access to truth.<sup>162</sup> Rabelais offers a scenario in which knowledge obtained through the senses (sight) and experience (the lion's own wound) is so dependent on the circumstances of that knowledge (Who is the knower? What is the knower's experience?) that it cannot successfully be used as the basis for charitable actions.<sup>163</sup> Even charity is ultimately self-interested in that it is premised on a knowledge that comes from the self. This knowledge is in turn unstable and relative, as Machiavelli suggested in *Mandragola*.

<sup>158</sup> See Giannetti.

<sup>159</sup> See Biow, 117–51.

<sup>160</sup> Rabelais, 300–03, 396–97.

<sup>161</sup> Hampton, 2012, 41–46.

<sup>162</sup> Matthews, 181.

<sup>163</sup> Hampton, 2012, 48–49.

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