

MOTHERHOOD AND THE IDENTITY FORMATION OF MASCULINITIES IN
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY “ERUDITE COMEDY”

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The *commedia erudita* (erudite comedy) is a five-act drama that is written in the vernacular and regulated by unity of time and place. It was conceived and reached its mature form in Italy during the first half of the sixteenth century. Erudite comedies were composed for audiences from the elite classes and performed in private settings. Since the plots dramatized the lives of contemporary, sixteenth-century urban dwellers, this genre of drama reflects many of the issues that preoccupied the elite classes during this period: the art of identity formation, the nature, attributes, and legitimacy of those who claim the authority to rule, and the relationship between power and gender, age, and experience.

The dissertation analyzes five comedies: Ludovico Ariosto's *I suppositi* (1509), Niccolò Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (1518) and *Clizia* (1525), Antonio Landi's *Il commodo* (1539), and Giovan Maria Cecchi's *La stiava* (1546). These plays represent and critique idealized visions of patriarchal masculinity among the elite of Renaissance Italy through an engagement with the problems that maternity and mothering present to patriarchal ideology and identity. By unpacking the ways in which patriarchal masculinity is articulated in response to the challenges of maternal femininity, this dissertation gives a

rich account of the gender order and the ways in which it was being problematized during the Italian Renaissance.

This dissertation offers a series of interrelated analyses that employ motherhood as an analytical category, examining how the anxieties of the Renaissance male elite about emasculation and male impotence pervaded the ideological assumptions underlying the identity formation of the gendered individual. It argues that, in order to resolve these anxieties, femininity, masculinity, motherhood, and fatherhood are constructed in these plays as intersecting categories of identity.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Yael Manes began her undergraduate studies in the Department of General History at Tel-Aviv University, Israel, in 1994. She received the Rector's List Award in 1996, and in 1997, she was recognized for academic excellence by the Israeli Parliament. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree, summa cum laude, in 1998 and was the class valedictorian. As a student in the Master's program in the School of History at Tel-Aviv University, she taught a Freshman Critical Reading Seminar for which she received an Excellence in Teaching Award in 2001. In 2002, she entered the doctorate program in the Department of History at Cornell University where she specialized in Renaissance and Medieval history and Italian literature. She is currently a Hanadiv Postdoctoral Fellow in European and Western History, and her next project will focus on the history of fifteenth-century Italian religious drama.

To Gadi, just as I promised.

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Introduction

I. Feminine Fatherhood?

In *I suppositi*, a comedy written by Ludovico Ariosto in 1509, a man travels to Ferrara to find his son, whom he misses dearly, and take him home to Sicily. Once in Ferrara, he shares the details of his arduous trip with a local man whom he met on the street. He tells the man from Ferrara that he would not even have considered undertaking such a trip except for his unyielding desire to reunite with his son. In response to something that the man from Ferrara tells him off-stage, the Sicilian father declares that “certainly, my dear worthy man, what you say is indeed true, that no love can be compared to a father’s love.”¹ The two men agree that, in the hierarchy of emotions, paternal love has the highest standing. As the dialogue continues, however, they disagree on the specific nature of that love. Soon after his son left home to study at the University of Ferrara, the father discovered that he could not bear to be separated from his son; he is afraid he will eventually die without his son by his side. He also tells the Ferraran how concerned he is that his son is studying so hard that he neglects to eat properly and take care of his health. The Ferraran replies immediately that “To love one’s children is human, but to

¹ Ludovico Ariosto, *The Pretenders*, in *The Comedies of Ariosto*, trans. and eds. Edmond M. Beame and Leonard G. Sbrocchi (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 76. “Sii certo, valent’ uomo, che come tu dici, é cosi veramente, che nessuno amor a quel del padre si puó agguagliare.” Lodovico Ariosto, “I suppositi,” ed. Giovanni Tortoli, *Commedie e satire di Lodovico Ariosto*, vol. 1 (Florence: Barbèra, Bianchi e Comp., 1856), 523 (IV:3).

have such tenderness is womanly,” to which the father responds, “That’s the way I am.”²

This scene underscores a particular gendering of emotions: the two male characters seem to take for granted that there are different types of love and that their classification is determined by gender—paternal love and feminine love, the love of a man for his son and the love of a woman, presumably a maternal figure, for her child. Yet, while the two men agree that the relationship between fathers and sons is the best of all, they do not share an understanding about the desirable nature of that relationship. The man from Ferrara equates the need for the physical presence of one’s child, separation anxiety, and tenderness with femininity, and he is judgmental towards the father who loves his son in this way.³ The father is unapologetic about his feelings and simply states that this is the way he is.

What can this exchange tell us about the understanding of femininity and masculinity in Renaissance Italy? What might be revealed through an historical inquiry into the perceptions of gender-relations that this play contains? This scene from *I suppositi* suggests a complex understanding of gender in the Renaissance in which individuals have agency in the formation of their own gendered identities. The father character refuses to identify with the “natural” properties of the sexes that his interlocutor offers: while he does not deny that he exhibits tenderness, that he cannot bear a long separation

² *The Pretenders*, 77. “Ferrarese: Amor de’ figliuoli è cosa umana, ma averne tanta tenerezza, è femminile. Filogono [the father]: lo son così fatto.” *I suppositi*, 525 (IV:3).

³ Since the subordinate clause in the quoted passage (that to have so much tenderness is feminine) begins with a “but” (“ma”), its relationship to the main clause (that to love one’s son is human, natural) is argumentative and challenging.

from his son, and that he is concerned about his son's daily nutrition and physical health, he refuses to identify with an image that defines him as womanly.

The plays that I analyze in this dissertation represent and critique idealized visions of patriarchal masculinity amongst the elite of Renaissance Italy. They do this through an engagement with the problems that maternity and mothering present to patriarchal ideology and identity. By unpacking the multifarious ways in which patriarchal masculinity is articulated in response to the challenges of maternal femininity, an analysis of the plays gives a rich account of the gender order and the ways in which it was being problematized during a period of extreme upheaval in Italian history.

II. The Cultural Crisis of Renaissance Italian Elites

Between 1494 and 1559, the Italian peninsula was rocked by military invasions and political challenges to the sovereignty of its various states. In the 1490s, France invaded Italy twice, claiming the kingdom of Naples and the Duchy of Milan as its rightful inheritance. This marked the beginning of a complicated dynastic feud that involved France, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire (Charles V was both the king of Spain from 1516 and the Holy Roman Emperor from 1519).⁴ The regimes, the constitutional forms, and the identity of the ruling elites in Italy were challenged throughout these troubled decades. One immediate response, for instance from figures like Niccolò Machiavelli, Lodovico Alamanni, and Francesco Guicciardini, was an attempt to

⁴ Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (1979. reprint, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 277-301.

understand the crisis by reconceptualizing the ways in which politics and power were perceived.⁵

In addition to the immediate effect on political theory and its theorists, however, the decades of invasions had more general and longer-term influences on the intellectual and cultural elites. In the face of continual military defeats, the weakness of the Italian governing elites was clear for all to see. Their worth and the strength of the dominant culture, including its republican and humanistic aspects, were questioned. Overall, as a result of the crisis Italians reevaluated and transformed many aspects of their culture, including literature, the visual arts, and theatre. Lauro Martines, for example, considers Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1513-18) one of the most representative literary products of the Renaissance because it addresses and reflects the crisis of the upper-classes during this period. Martines claims that the key to the work's seductiveness and its huge international popularity derives from the fact that it shifts back and forth between an imagined ideal world and a more sobering reality. The various characters that participate in the conversations in the *Courtier* reconstruct their identities in order to fashion an idealized relationship between courtier and prince. By doing so, the literary work made the ideal seem attainable to the powerless elites who could thus live vicariously through it.⁶

⁵ Alison Brown, "Rethinking the Renaissance in the Aftermath of the Italy's Crisis," in *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance 1300-1550*, ed. John M. Najemy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 254-59.

⁶ Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 322-31.

III. Erudite Comedy: its Origins and Development

In this project, I examine a different but equally important Renaissance Italian art form, the so-called *commedia erudita* (erudite comedy). This genre of drama was conceived and reached its mature form during the first half of the sixteenth century. It was composed for audiences from the elite classes and performed in private settings. *Commedia erudita* reflects many issues that preoccupied the elite, governing classes during this unsettling period in Italian history: the art of identity formation, the nature, attributes, and legitimacy of those who claim the authority to rule, and the relationship between power and gender, age, and experience. In fact, the popularity of comedy during the Renaissance outweighed that of all other dramatic forms, and comedies accounted for ninety percent of all performances.⁷

Erudite comedy is a five-act drama in the vernacular, regulated by unity of time (the action takes place within the span of twenty-four hours) and place (the action transpires in one physical location and the stage represents only that space). The plots dramatized for their elite audiences a contemporary, sixteenth-century urban setting. The formal literary theory that defined the genre began developing only in the 1540s,⁸ but the prologues to plays

⁷ Riccardo Scrivano, "Towards a 'Philosophy' of Renaissance Theatre," in *Comparative Critical Approaches to Renaissance Comedy*, ed. Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1986), 9; Domenico Pietropaolo, "The Stage in the Text: A Theatrical Stratification of Italian Renaissance Comedy," in *Comparative Critical Approaches to Renaissance Comedy*, 35.

⁸ A new printed edition of Aristotle's *Poetics* appeared in 1536 and seems to have been an impetus to the development of literary theory in Italy. Before that date we know of only six treatises on literary theory, whereas fifty-two new treatises were composed by 1600. See Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 349-71 and Weinberg, ed., *Trattati di poetica e retorica del Cinquecento* (Bari: G. Laterza, 1970-4).

composed earlier in the century demonstrate that playwrights were self-conscious about creating a new literary genre. This new theatrical genre emerged and flourished in Venice, Florence, Rome, Ferrara, Mantua, and Siena.⁹

The genre had its origins in various literary and theatrical traditions. The comedies of Terence are one of these: since the Middle Ages, they were widely used to teach Latin in monasteries, in grammar schools attended by the elite youth, and at the universities. But Roman comedy as theatre, and not merely as a pedagogical medium, was reintroduced into Italian culture only after the discovery in 1429 of twelve comedies by Plautus and the discovery in 1433 of the commentary of Donatus on Terence.¹⁰ During the fifteenth century, Roman comedy was not only read in Latin, but also performed in Latin at the universities, and soon after it was being performed in translation at Italian courts. Then, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Roman model was adapted to a contemporary vernacular form.¹¹

⁹ For the definition of the genre and its literary origins, see Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 29-48; Leo Salinger, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 175-90; Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, *The Birth of Modern Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 11; Nino Borsellino, *Commedie del Cinquecento*, vol. 1 (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), vii-xxxix; and Mario Apollonio, *Storia del teatro italiano*, vol. 1 (Florence: Sansoni, 1954), 272-73.

¹⁰ By Nicholas of Cusa and Giovanni Aurispa, respectively. See Letizia Panizza, "Literature in the Vernacular," in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, ed. Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 177.

¹¹ Ariosto's *Cassaria* (1508) is usually identified as the first example of the genre, although some scholars give primacy to the pseudo Publio Filippo Mantovano's *Formicone* (1503).

A learned audience would no doubt have recognized that erudite comedies follow the plots and the structure of their Roman predecessors.¹² However, as they developed, erudite comedies became much more than the Roman genre that lay at their origin. More than a passive incorporation of classical models, they articulated as well as shaped the cultural mentality of their elite audiences. And, in addition to transforming Roman comedy, they also drew upon the rich tradition of medieval secular drama, court pageants and spectacles, *sacre rappresentazioni* (religious drama), and the *novella* tradition, especially Boccaccio's *Decameron*.¹³

The plots of erudite comedies presented family dramas of the urban, middle-class. The stories are rife with adolescent males who disobey their parents in their desire for sexual and personal fulfillment, young females who disobey their parents or guardians in their search for love, sexuality, and freedom of choice, old men who attempt to marry young women who will provide them with heirs, and domestic servants who take part in the designs of their masters and mistresses.¹⁴ As Richard Andrews has noted, many of the tension-ridden relationships that appeared in Roman comedy—between

¹² For example, in their division into five acts and their unity of time and place. The genre was referred to as “regular comedy” (*commedia regolare*) and “erudite comedy” precisely because it imitated classical models.

¹³ See, for example, Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 9-30; Marvin T. Herrick, *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance* (Freeport, New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1960), 1-59; Radcliff-Umstead, *The Birth of Modern Comedy*, 23-58; Beame and Sbrocchi, “Introduction,” in *The Comedies of Ariosto*, viii-xvii; Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 133-34.

¹⁴ On generational conflicts in comedy, see Northrop Frye, “The argument of Comedy,” in *Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Leonard F. Dean (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 79-89.

fathers and sons, masters and servants, and patrons and parasitic clients—made their way into Italian Renaissance erudite comedy.¹⁵

IV. Absent Mothers

My project was conceived when I became aware of a curious lacuna: while scholars have discussed the domestic nature of the *commedia erudita* and have quite aptly written about the conceptions of fatherhood and the father-son relationships that one finds in this genre, not much has been written on motherhood. This absence may be due to the fact that, of the 125 erudite comedies composed during the first half of the sixteenth century, only fifty eight contain mother characters. This means that an examination of the issue of motherhood and the mother-child relationship on the Italian stage is, in fact, an inquiry into a frequently absent relationship.

This absence, however, is the very core of the matter: why are mothers so often absent in *commedia erudita* and what does this absence mean?¹⁶ Why do mothers appear as characters in less than half of the plays when fathers appear in virtually all of them? This absence is even more glaring when we note that the subject-matter of the plays is, almost without exception, the family: the plots revolve around the intricate relationship between various

¹⁵ Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 30.

¹⁶ Maggie Gunsberg notes the “remarkable paucity of mothers” in the *commedia erudita*, but does not explore the issue. See her *Gender and the Italian Stage: From the Renaissance to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9. Davida Gavioli claims that in the Western literary tradition the mother does not speak, but is spoken about. The mother is an object because the “mother-as-she-speaks” is a subject and her voice has a disruptive force. See Davida Gavioli, “In Search of the Mother’s Lost Voice,” in *Gendered Contexts: New Perspectives in Italian Cultural Studies*, ed. Laura Benedetti, Julia L. Hairston and Silvia M. Ross (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 203.

members of the household, the social networks linking different families, and the problematization of the domestic space. Why, then, are mothers so often absent from plays that dramatize the familial sphere?

In the first half of the sixteenth century women were rarely allowed on stage, and erudite comedies were performed by amateur male actors. But this fact alone does not explain the absence of mothers because these plays have an abundance of other female characters: servants, wet nurses, old women, and young, virginal women. Nor can this absence be explained by the Roman origins of Renaissance comedy. Although Plautus and Terence did not write many female roles into their plays, there are proportionally more mothers in their comedies than in sixteenth-century *commedia erudita*: in the twenty plays of Plautus there are eleven mothers, and in Terence's six surviving plays there are four.

The paucity of mother characters becomes even more curious when it is compared with the extensive treatment of mothers and the emphasis on the importance of their roles in the broader cultural context of the period. Indeed, almost all Renaissance discussions of women were specifically focused on motherhood. Clarissa Atkinson has noted that by the sixteenth century religious writings represented the virtue of women as their ability to become mothers. Ideologies of motherhood were revised so that motherhood was no longer only one possible aspect of the life of a woman, but became the essential component of a woman's virtue.¹⁷

Moreover, Humanism—the backdrop for the revival of comedy in the Renaissance—was deeply concerned with issues such as the household, the

¹⁷ Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 238-42.

family, and the education, comportment and nature of women. Whether the treatises that humanists wrote were sympathetic or misogynistic in their approaches to women, the roles and responsibilities of mothers were always dealt with in detail. More than that, humanists such as Leon Battista Alberti, Francesco Barbaro, and Juan Luis Vives, who discussed the nature of women and marriage, often equated a woman's worth with her potential to become a mother.

There were other Renaissance discourses that equated womanhood with motherhood. From the middle of the thirteenth century, medical writings on women focused almost exclusively on generation and reproduction, neglecting all other aspects of women's illnesses and health.¹⁸ The uterus was understood as the organ that regulates women's health. For example, the fourteenth-century anatomist Mondino de' Liuzzi noted that the uterus was connected to women's higher organs: to the brain, heart, and liver as well as to the breast, diaphragm, bladder, and colon. The heart, however, was perceived as the organ that regulates men's health.¹⁹ The uterus symbolized womanhood; the heart was employed as a symbolic representation of manhood. In this way, male identity was represented through an organ that stood for selfhood and reflexive consciousness while female identity was represented as a product of their function as mothers.

Clearly, motherhood and mothers appeared frequently and with great intensity in many aspects of Renaissance culture. The underlying assumption

¹⁸ Monica H. Green, "Secrets of Women," in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 733-34.

¹⁹ Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (Zone Books: New York, 2006), 103-4.

in this project is, therefore, that their absence from most erudite comedies was a culturally meaningful choice. This absence cannot be simply explained away by the origins, subject matter, or conventions of the genre. Nor can it be explained by a lack of intellectual interest in the issues of motherhood, womanhood, and the formation of gendered identities during the Renaissance. In fact, erudite comedies were produced during a period in early modern history in which discourses on the significance of gender differentiation and the gendered formation of identities pervaded many aspects of the culture.

V. Gender in Early Modern Europe

1. Gender as a Category of Analysis

Obviously, then, I do not regard the absence of mothers from a significant number of erudite comedies as directly mimetic of the social, political, and cultural experience of the period. Rather, I follow Caroline Bynum in assuming that, when examining men's attitudes towards the feminine, we should not assume that we are uncovering the historical status of women, or how men felt towards their own mothers, sisters and other, real, females. Rather, men's perceptions of the feminine allude to the ways in which they perceive their own gender.²⁰ I assume, therefore, that when Renaissance playwrights composed familial dramas in which mothers are frequently erased, or when they put mothers on stage with certain attributes and roles, they were defining their own male identities and expressing the ways in which they understood their gendered communities. These comedies do not reveal the historical subjectivity of women, but the subjectivity of the men who

²⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 168.

commissioned, wrote, and performed them. They are, above all, expressions and negotiations of masculinity.

But any articulation of masculinity or femininity is necessarily also a negotiation within the gender system that regulates a society. In this project, I examine how Renaissance ideologies of gender operated in the familial space that erudite comedy presented on stage. Because erudite comedy stages the family, it is a privileged site for the cultural historian who wishes to inquire into the construction of gender. As Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead suggest, the inherently gendered nature of kinship and marriage means that these are critical social domains that produce, and are produced by, ideologies of gender.²¹

All cultures have ideologies of gender. However, the formality, the complexity, and the effect these ideologies have on society vary. Renaissance Italy—and certainly Renaissance Florence—contained complex ideologies of gender that had power in the organization of the social, political, and economic realms. As Stanley Chojnacki has argued, the Renaissance state was concerned with gender just as much as with politics.²² This implies that historians *must* pay attention to the Renaissance preoccupation with gender as much as to that culture's preoccupation with politics. Studies of Renaissance politics are incomplete without an understanding of the politics of gender. Scholars have presented various opinions on the position of women in

²¹ Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, "Introduction," in *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 10-13.

²² "Was the Italian Renaissance state concerned with gender? Are gender and politics related parts of a historical process? [...] the answer to both questions is yes [...]." Stanley Chojnacki, *Men and Women in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 27.

Renaissance Italy: some have argued that women were merely pawns in the strategic games of men and their agnatic lineages,²³ while others have argued that Renaissance women did “have a Renaissance” and had more power and freedom than modern scholars grant them.²⁴ What is hardly contested, though, is that Renaissance ideologies of gender contained at least some, and often many, aspects of a patriarchal worldview.

2. Three Senses of “Patriarchy”

When discussing Renaissance ideologies of gender, I will often refer to “patriarchy” and to “patriarchal ideology.” I see “patriarchy” as relevant in three related spheres. First, it refers to a Renaissance theory of governance. Secular and religious authorities throughout sixteenth-century Europe used the model of the patriarchal family—in which ultimate authority rests with the oldest, name-bearing father of an extended familial household—to support

²³ Joan Kelly, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, Mass. and Toronto: D. C. Heath and Company, 1995), 15-26; Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Manlio Bellomo, *La condizione giuridica della donna in Italia: vicende antiche e moderne* (Turin: ERI, 1970), 35-47, and also his *Ricerche sui rapporti patrimoniali tra coniugi: contributo alla storia della famiglia medievale* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1961); Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

²⁴ Stanley Chojnacki, “Patrician Women in Early Renaissance Venice,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 21 (1974), 176-203; Julius Kirshner, “Wives’ Claims Against Insolvent Husbands in Late Medieval Italy,” in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy*, ed. J. Kirshner and S. Wemple (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 256-303; Gene Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986); Judith C. Brown, “A Woman’s Place was in the Home: Women’s Work in Renaissance Tuscany,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret L. Ferguson, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 206-25.

their claims to control all aspects of life. John Najemy has pointed out that in Florence of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the connection between the political structure, the spread of civic humanism, and patriarchy became ever more explicit. Florentine politics were controlled by an oligarchy that justified its legitimacy by presenting itself as a collective of benevolent fathers governing the civic family.²⁵ Civic humanism—a political theory of republicanism that presented governance as the common privilege as well as the responsibility of citizens—was predicated on the language of fatherhood. The polity was perceived not as a collection of individuals who have the fundamental right to fulfill their own personal aspirations, but rather as a consensus between responsible and virtuous paternal figures. This idea that the legitimacy of power lies in paternal authority pervaded Florentine history well into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, Dale Kent has shown that, during the second half of the fifteenth century, the regimes of Cosimo, Piero, and Lorenzo de' Medici used the language of patriarchy to legitimate their unconstitutional power.²⁶ Whereas earlier the political ideology of civic humanism presented the polity as a harmonious cooperation between the fathers of Florence (the representatives of the elite families), the Medici promoted a vision of one benevolent and wise father who governs the body-politic.

²⁵ John M. Najemy, "Giannozzo and His Elders: Alberti's Critique of Renaissance Patriarchy," in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2002), 51-78.

²⁶ For example, see her "A Window on Cosimo de' Medici, *Paterfamilias* and Politician, from within His Own Household: The Letters of His Personal Assistant, Ser Alesso Pelli," in *Florence and Beyond: Culture, Society, and Politics in Renaissance Italy. Essays in Honour of John M. Najemy*, ed. David S. Peterson and Daniel E. Bornstein (Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2008), 355-67.

Second, in addition to operating in the sphere of political theory, the term patriarchy also refers to the sphere of political practice. The patriarchal justification of legitimate governance was at the foundation of an elaborate system of regulations and statutes that excluded young men from the most important areas in politics until they reached the life stage of heads of family. Meanwhile, women were not only excluded from the practicalities of governance, but, as Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has shown, “the *polis* was masculine,” since, from the thirteenth century, Italian women were not allowed to enter public or civic buildings unaccompanied by an adult male.²⁷ They were excluded from the civic and political spheres on the grounds that femininity was equated with emotional, moral, and intellectual immaturity.

Ortner and Whitehead claim that, throughout Western history, there has been a general tendency to define men through role categories (warrior, hunter, statesman) and to define women in relational terms (wife, mother, sister).²⁸ In the patriarchal culture of Renaissance Florence, however, men too were defined in terms of their relationship status as fathers, husbands, and sons. Moreover, it was quite difficult to distinguish between men’s relational status and their social roles, since “father” was both a family relation and a social and political role. Fatherhood and motherhood were both understood as performative roles, and in practice fatherhood was as much a performance in the political sphere as it was in the domestic sphere.

²⁷ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “Les femmes dans les espaces publics de la ville italienne (XIVe-XVe siècles),” in *Anthropologie de la ville médiévale*, ed. Michal Tymowski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Dig, 1999), 83-90.

²⁸ Ortner and Whitehead, *The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, 8.

Third, in addition to functioning in the spheres of both political theory and governance, patriarchy also functioned in the cultural production of values and symbols. Here, patriarchy refers to a set of gendered assumptions, attitudes, and identities that were enacted, negotiated, and contested through various acts of representation. It is in this third sense that I examine patriarchy in the ideological construction of gender, where it presents a series of ambiguities and paradoxes.²⁹ The line of inquiry I pursue is a close reading of several plays that examines how the ideological assumptions of patriarchy interact with other cultural perceptions of gender. The dominant gender ideology of the elite classes that produced, performed, and consumed erudite comedies was indeed patriarchal. My analysis, however, goes beyond this classification and unfolds the multi-layered meanings of gender that these texts contain. The reading I offer assumes that these plays functioned as ideological battlefields of sorts—battlefields where the various meanings and functions of gender were conceived, examined, and negotiated.

3. Gender as a Social Construct

Gender, of course, is not only an ideological construct, but also a lived social experience. Naomi Miller, for example, has examined early modern social and artistic reevaluations of maternity and found that the representation of women by men both reflected and dominated many assumptions about gender. She further found that women were not powerless in the definition of their identity but rather that they continuously negotiated their identities and

²⁹ See, for example, Emlyn Eisenach, *Husbands, Wives, and Concubines: Marriage, Family, and Social Order in Sixteenth-Century Verona* (Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2004) and Pamela Joseph Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

roles.³⁰ Indeed, since gender and sexuality are discursive systems invested with meaning, they are subject to interpretation and evaluation by the historian as well as by the historical subjects that initially constructed them.

Renaissance women and men were not merely subject to representations that determined their identities. Rather, they formed their own selfhood in response to the context of gender ideology that they experienced. They had agency in how they chose to interpret their gender as well as in the way they pieced it all together into a coherent performance of identity.

The social experience of motherhood could therefore be quite different from its ideological and cultural construction in the plays. My project, however, does not aim at reconstructing the experience of motherhood, since, after all, sixteenth-century erudite comedies were composed by male playwrights and are products of the male psyche. Rather, I aim to understand the system of gender that erudite comedies formed and represented within a larger context of interrelated cultural meanings. "Motherhood," then, is not my object of inquiry, but the vehicle of inquiry. It is the analytical prism through which I examine the ways in which Renaissance men from the elite classes understood and articulated the formation of their own gendered identities.

VI. Structure of the Dissertation

This project employs motherhood as an analytical category while pursuing a close textual analysis of five erudite comedies. This hermeneutical methodology reveals with particular clarity how anxieties about emasculation

³⁰ Naomi J. Miller, "Mothering Others: Caregiving as Spectrum and Spectacle in the Early Modern Period," in *Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregiving in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 1-25.

and male impotence pervaded the ideological assumptions of the Renaissance male elite about the identity formation of the gendered individual. It also shows that, in order to resolve these anxieties, femininity, masculinity, motherhood, and fatherhood are constructed in these texts as intersecting categories of identity.

Part one examines how a pair of erudite comedies by Niccolò Machiavelli—*La Mandragola* (1518) and *Clizia* (1525)—articulate a relationship both between motherhood and power, and between maternal identity and authority. These first two chapters argue that the mother characters in these plays offer insights into a core conflict in the patriarchal ideology of Renaissance Italy. On the one hand, the identity of the ideal woman is represented through the image of a child-bearing wife. On the other hand, Machiavelli's comedies also articulate a fantasy in which a woman who functions as an ideal wife by providing children to her husband nonetheless does not assume the role of a mother. His plays reveal an understanding that mothering—motherhood as an activity that women undertake and not simply a relational position they occupy—challenges patriarchy because it allows mothers agency in obtaining power and authority.

Part two considers the maternal performances in Antonio Landi's *Il comodo* (1539) and Giovan Maria Cecchi's *La stiava* (1546/1550.) Here, I examine the discursive relationship between these plays and the representations of ideal motherhood in the prescriptive literature of Renaissance Humanism, arguing that the plays undermine the core assumptions about gender that underlie the prescriptive discourse of Humanism. This intertextual analysis demonstrates how identity formation in the Renaissance relied on a negotiation between different ideologies of

gender. Where, in prescriptive literature, men were conventionally perceived as the rational agents of stable social relations, *Il commodo* and *La stiava* represent male relationships as vicious generational wars between fathers and sons. And, where the prescriptive literature saw women as chaotic and socially disruptive, in the plays motherhood is performed in a way that redefines femininity, masculinity, and the interactions between these social identities.

Part three examines Ludovico Ariosto's *I suppositi* (1509). This comedy stages domestic spaces that contain no mother characters and thus offers an important alternative to the bilateral construction of gender offered by the other plays. This final section explores whether the patriarchal anxieties of emasculation were relieved through the elimination of motherhood altogether. I examine whether this play articulates a fantasy of *patria potestas* and self-sufficiency in which ideal families are motherless families or whether the absence of mothers rather emphasizes the paradox in the Renaissance construction of masculinity.

VII. The Choice of Plays

The fundamental assumption of this project is that gender is produced culturally through a variety of discursive modes, including politics, medicine, drama, and the visual arts. And because gender is a discursive construct, a hermeneutics of close textual analysis enables a nuanced inquiry into the individual and collective understandings of gender represented and enacted in those texts. Nonetheless, a close reading of a few case studies requires some justification for the choice of texts.³¹

³¹ See Guido Ruggiero's discussion of close reading and the choice of case-studies in his *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 5. His criteria

The primary criterion guiding my choice of plays is that all of them problematize three issues: power, authority, and virtue. As the following chapters will demonstrate, these are three of the key issues that constantly appear in the Renaissance discourses on gender and identity formation. They were also defining aspects of the broader sixteenth-century re-evaluation of Italian culture undertaken by the elite classes in response to crisis. These elites, who were the main consumers of erudite comedy, reevaluated their identities and the public images they wished to project because of the challenges they faced during the Italian wars of the first half of the sixteenth century. Martines has argued that contemporaries as well as modern historians conceived this process as an identity crisis. The disparity between idealized expectations for social and political order and empirically experienced disarray led to a variety of compensatory responses. On the one hand, figures like Machiavelli claimed to soberly evaluate factual realities and offer possible solutions to Italy's ills. On the other hand, figures like Castiglione preferred to reiterate and re-work the idealized vision of society.³²

Regardless of the approach, however, the attempts of the upper classes to deal with the politically and socially precarious experience of the period involved a questioning of the nature of power and the authority to wield it. They were particularly interested in the disparity between theories of ideal government—in which individuals govern owing to their merits and virtues—and what they perceived as an empirical situation of un-virtuous rulers and failed government. The issue of virtue and its place in discourses of power is not, of course, a Renaissance invention: since the early Middle Ages, the

for examining five comedies involve the ways in which they reveal sex and gender on stage.

³² Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 297-301.

literary genre of *speculum principis*, “mirror for princes,” had established connections between moral virtues and legitimate authority to rule. The questions posed in the political philosophy of classical Greece and republican Rome continued to occupy Renaissance humanists: by what virtues did individuals become worthy of power? Do those same virtues turn an individual into a capable ruler? What role models for imitation or avoidance should be used to instruct rulers? Machiavelli examined these questions in many, if not most, of his writings.³³ In particular, his plays, *La Mandragola* and *Clizia*, inquire into the issues of virtue, power, and authority in relation to the formation of maternal identity.

All of the plays investigated here also thematize the problem of maternal authority in one way or another. As many scholars of early-modern Europe have noted, this issue dominated many of that period’s discussions of gender and power. Maternity is both a physical and a social construct, and the physicality of mothers—specifically, the organs of the breasts and the uterus—was represented in multiple ways and invested with complex social meanings: both nurturing and disrupting; serving others and obtaining authority and power via their reproductive organs. The generative powers of the womb, the image of the mother as caregiver, and women’s domestic roles gave women, in their role as mothers, social influence beyond the immediate confines of

³³ Quentin Skinner claims that *The Prince* should be understood in the framework of the “mirror-for-princes” genre. He argues that, although Machiavelli criticizes his contemporaries and their notions of virtue, he does not divorce morality from politics. Rather, he underscores the importance of virtue in discourses of power. See Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 128-38.

their homes, and for this reason they were often construed as potentially dangerous to male social order.³⁴

The issue of virtue and its relation to gender differentiation and authority is the central axis of chapters three, four, and five. Virtue was indeed a key issue in the educated Renaissance elite's assessment of the political and military difficulties of Italy, but it was also a central issue in the prescriptive literature on household management and the ideal roles, functions, and duties of parents. The humanistic treatises that I survey in chapter three identified the essential virtues that should fashion the model wife and mother, husband and father. The comedies examined in chapters four and five, Landi's *Il comodo* and Cecchi's *La stiava*, problematize the nature of virtue by examining its relation to gender. They both reflect their period's conventions about the virtues that fathers and mothers should possess and at the same time exhibit doubts, concerns, and anxieties about the same conventions.

By examining the issues of virtue and gender roles in this way, *Il Commodo* and *La stiava* partook in the sixteenth-century *querelle des femmes*.³⁵ The "quarrel" was a literary debate that became prominent in European culture during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its participants,

³⁴ Miller, "Mothering Others." See also the articles in part IV, "Social Authority," in Miller and Yavneh which address different aspects of the early modern preoccupation with maternal authority, and Laura McClure, "Maternal Authority and Heroic Disgrace in Aeschylus's *Persae*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 136:1 (2006), 71-97, who discusses how the social authority of women in classical Greece derived from their status as mothers of sons.

³⁵ For a thorough and exhaustive survey of the main texts, participants, and themes of the *querelle des femmes*, see the first chapter in Gisela Bock, *Women in European History*, trans. Allison Brown (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). See also Catherine King, *Renaissance Women Patrons: Wives and Widows in Italy, 1300-1550* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 20-32.

men and women alike, debated the nature, worth, and functions of women: should women be educated and do they even have the intellectual capacity to be so? Should women participate in politics and do they have the necessary moral and civic virtues to do so? What are the ideal feminine virtues and how would they benefit society? Ultimately, the *querelle des femmes* was one more medium through which Renaissance men and women defined their gendered identities. For this reason, I also examine *Il commodo* and *La stiava* for their insights into this centuries-long discourse on gender.

Moreover, because Landi and Cecchi composed their plays between 1539 and 1545, they provide a glimpse into a significant period in the history of Florentine theatre. After the Medici family was expelled in 1494, Florence lost its pre-eminence in theatre to the courts of Italy and regained it only during the Grand Duchy of the 1530s and 1540s.³⁶ The control of the Medici dukes over cultural production influenced Florentine erudite comedy, which generally became more conservative and moralistic than the comedy of the previous two decades.³⁷ This change of tenor is evident, for example, in *Il commodo* where the ridicule of older men—a characteristic feature of earlier examples of this genre—is absent.

I concentrate mainly on Florentine plays and their relation to other cultural discourses of Renaissance Florence. This Florentine emphasis is derived from my source base. When we examine the whole corpus of Italian erudite comedies composed during the first half of the sixteenth century,

³⁶ Nerida Newbigin, "Secular and Religious Drama in the Middle Ages," in *A History of Italian Theatre*, ed. Joseph Farrell and Paolo Puppa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18.

³⁷ Richard Andrews, "Theatre," in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, 282.

mother characters appear in forty-six percent of the plays. However, when we examine the Florentine production of erudite comedies, mother characters appear in sixty-eight percent of the plays. Because my inquiry into the formation of gender employs motherhood as an analytical category, I devote the lion's share of my attention to the culture—Florentine culture—that staged significantly more mothers in its plays. However, because counter-examples of non-Florentine plays that contain no mother-characters might illuminate the Florentine ideology of gender and identity formation from a different vantage-point, I conclude my inquiry with a non-Florentine play—Ariosto's *I suppositi*.

VIII. Final Thoughts: Culture and Agency

In the last three decades, much of the critical literature on the history of early-modern Europe has focused on the issue of subjectivity: how individuals and cultures enacted identity formations, performances of the self, expressions of collective self-understanding, and the like. Scholars have especially focused on the agency of historical subjects in forming individual and collective identities, and I seek to participate in this scholarly discourse by examining how men from the Italian elite classes constructed their gendered identities in the intersections of Italian Renaissance drama, literature, and ideology. It is my hope that this project will become a medium for scholarly exchange that crosses existing disciplinary boundaries and establishes meaningful interactions with scholars whose interests lie outside the Italian peninsula. To that end, I have a few final, clarifying points.

My interpretation of the plays—plays whose plots are, after all, ironical in nature—is essentially non-ironic. To the reader who wonders whether the twists and turns of their plots should be taken seriously, whether these

comedies in fact provide insights into the *mentalité* of their times, I answer in the positive. Dramatic irony confronts an audience with an “upside-down” world and leads its audience to compare that performed world with the “real” world outside the theatrical event. But irony exists only as long as the audience concedes that both worlds are possible, only as long as the audience wishes to sustain a paradoxical sphere in which a thing and its inverse are possible. For if the world that is being dramatized on the stage is never desired nor considered as a real possibility, ironic tension and its subsequent comic relief will not ensue.

Erich Segal has argued that the function of comedy is to reintegrate individuals into communities by serving as the cathartic release for hostile and disruptive feelings and impulses. The home, he continues, is the first place that comedy attacks in order to give its audience a release from negative feelings.³⁸ The plots of erudite comedies are ironic, and they offer a comic relief for their audiences and readers. Yet at the same time, erudite comedies scrutinize the domestic sphere and the familial arrangements of those who produced and consumed them. I believe that a sensitive historical analysis of these texts should therefore perceive them as media of expression for the deepest, most serious emotions and beliefs of early modern people.

My approach is influenced by Natalie Zemon Davis’s view of cultural products as the medium through which collective and individual identities are constructed and transformed. Like her, I assume that cultural products, such as erudite comedies, and the constructions of gendered identities that they enact are more than mere products of socio-political processes and that

³⁸ Erich Segal, *The Death of Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 24-25, 28.

historical subjects should not be reduced to a context or to any other single attribute.³⁹ Instead, since the historical subjectivity I examine is textual, I pursue a hermeneutics of close reading that unpacks the complex system of meaning in each playtext.

This close reading enables one to inquire into the particular ways in which each playtext reflects a specific ideology of gender, to examine how each constructs a specific critique of cultural beliefs and norms about gender, and to explore the unique ways in which each might have participated in the formation of individual and collective identities. Like Ariosto's man from Ferrara with whom I opened this introduction, I believe that "to love one's children is human." Yet my interest lies in understanding why one character is made to perceive tenderness as a womanly sentiment while another represents it as a legitimate form of fatherly love. Ultimately, I am not interested in underscoring the common nature of humanity, but in highlighting the wondrous range of historical and cultural differences.

³⁹ Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse, "Introduction," in *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800): Essays in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis*, ed. Diefendorf and Hesse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 1-8.

Part I

Introduction: Machiavelli's Concept of *virtù* as a Category of Analysis

I. The Serious Matter of Comedy

The sole reward he may hope to reap
Is for all to stand aside and snicker,
Decrying what they see and hear.
And that is why, if we look deep,
Today the ancient virtues flicker,
And high endeavors disappear;
For who would dare to preserve
In undertakings long or short,
Which nagging censure will abort,
And works on which fond hopes are pinned
Are cloaked in fog, or gone with the wind.¹

El premio che si spera è che ciascuno
si sta da canto e ghigna,
dicendo mal di ciò che vede o sente.
Di qui depende, senza dubbio alcuno,
che per tutto traligna
da l'antica virtù el secol presente,

¹ Niccolo Machiavelli, "The Mandrake," *The Comedies of Machiavelli: The Woman from Andros, The Mandrake, Clizia*, eds. and trans. David Sices and James B. Atkinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 159, 161.

imperò che la gente,
vedendo ch'ugnun biasma,
non s'affatica e spasma
per far con mille sua disagi un'opra,
che 'l vento guasti o la nebbia ricuopra.²

With these words in the prologue to his comedy *La Mandragola*, Niccolò Machiavelli assails the readers with a self-pitying litany. For all my hard work in composing this play, says the author, I expect to receive only criticism. He goes on preaching that this is the reason why ancient *virtù* has decayed so much in the present time: men do not take risks with worthy undertakings when they can expect to receive only censure.

By the time Machiavelli was writing these words, he could no longer participate in the political realm, despite his talent and ambition to do so. For the majority of the time during the Florentine republican regime of 1494-1512 (from 1498, to be precise), Machiavelli held public office. He did not occupy the highest and most influential of positions, but his observations and analyses of the political terrain did sometimes impact the decision makers of the regime. But in 1512, when the Medici returned from their exile and took over Florence once again, Machiavelli became a *persona non grata*. All his attempts to ingratiate himself with the Medici—including, for example, dedicating *The Prince* to Lorenzo de' Medici, the duke of Urbino—proved futile, and Machiavelli was cast outside the realm of politics that he loved so much, forced to become a mere passive observer.

² Niccolò Machiavelli, "Mandragola," *The Comedies*, 158, 160.

The difficult and painful position in which Machiavelli found himself might explain why he chose to begin *Mandragola* with harsh words, complaining about the sad present state of *virtù*. But there might be another explanation for Machiavelli's tenor, a tenor that seems incompatible with the genre of comedy. In a letter that he wrote to his friend Francesco Vettori on January 31, 1515, Machiavelli discusses matters of love and desire, thus responding to Vettori's descriptions in an earlier letter of his love affair with a young woman. After Machiavelli demonstrates that he too can discuss these sorts of issues, he writes:

Anyone who might see our letters, honorable *compare*, and see their variety, would be greatly astonished, because at first it would seem that we were serious men completely directed toward weighty matters and that no thought could cascade through our heads that did not have within it probity and magnitude. But later, upon turning the page, it would seem to the reader that we—still the very same selves—were petty, fickle, lascivious, and were directed toward chimerical matters. If to some this behavior seems contemptible, to me it seems laudable because we are imitating nature, which is changeable; whoever imitates nature cannot be censured.³

Chi vedesse le nostre lettere, onorando compare, et vedesse le diversità di quelle, si maraviglierebbe assai, perché gli parrebbe ora che noi fussimo uomini gravi, tutti vòliti a cose grandi, et che ne' petti nostri non potesse cascare alcuno pensiero che non avesse in sé onestà e

³ James B. Atkinson and David Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University, 1996), 313.

grandezza. Però dipoi, voltando carta, gli parrebbe quelli noi medesimi essere leggieri, inconstanti, lascivi, vòlti a cose vane. Questo modo di procedere, se a qualcuno pare sia vituperoso , a me pare laudabile, perché noi imitiamo la natura, che è varia; et chi imita quella non può essere ripreso.⁴

There is nothing wrong, Machiavelli writes, with shifting back and forth between discussions of serious things—politics—and lighthearted matters—love. To be able to move between these two poles of the serious and the trivial is praiseworthy because it demonstrates a skillful adaptability to the variable and the contingent. While people might be astonished that the very same men can be both serious and fickle, we (I, Machiavelli and you, Vettori) ought to be praised for our ability to imitate nature which is also variable and contingent. Indeed, after writing these words, Machiavelli moves from discussing Vettori's love affairs to commenting on political affairs (on the rumors regarding Giuliano de' Medici's plan to establish a new state in northern Italy). In a similar fashion, after bemoaning in the prologue to *Mandragola* his personal difficulties in the political and social world of Florence, and after criticizing the general state of affairs in present times, Machiavelli moves on to the lighthearted matters of comedy.

The ability to adapt and to move between polarities is a crucial skill in Machiavelli's worldview, a skill he closely connects with *virtù*, one of his core concepts. Machiavelli seems to suggest that if he is barred from politics, he will adapt to the circumstances and write another kind of discourse, a trivial

⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere (Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli, vol. 3)*, ed. Franco Gaeta (Turin: UTET, 1984), 488-91.

discourse perhaps, but one that nonetheless will ease his misery.⁵ But, as my opening quotation demonstrates, even in this “trifling” work of literature, Machiavelli is preoccupied with the serious issue of the nature of *virtù*.

II. Machiavelli's *Virtù*

It is nearly impossible to examine Machiavelli's works without inquiring into his perception of *virtù*. The term and its related adjective *virtuoso* and the adverb *virtuosamente* occur hundreds of times in the corpus of his works. Moreover, since *virtù* is intimately linked to power and authority, and because in the following chapters I examine how Machiavelli's comedies construct motherhood as a prism that problematizes the relationship between power, authority, and gender, it is necessary to account for Machiavelli's perception of *virtù*. Power and authority are strongly related in Machiavelli's writings to the question of what makes one worthy to rule. Whether he observes rulers from his own time (such as Cesare Borgia, Pope Julius II, and Ferdinand of Aragon), or leaders from past times (such as Moses, Agathocles, Hannibal, and Scipio Africanus), Machiavelli is unrelenting in asking if it is the unique characteristics of certain individuals or timeless and universal precepts that make one a worthy leader? Or is it perhaps the brute power that enables an individual to acquire and possess that makes him a worthy ruler?

Naturally, Machiavelli was not the only Renaissance intellectual whose worldview assigned a critical position to *virtù*: the term was significant in the writings of humanism, civic humanism, Renaissance political theory, and Neoplatonic philosophy. Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), Francesco Patrizi

⁵ “con questi van' pensieri fare il suo tristo tempo più suave.” *The Comedies*, 158.

(1413-1494), Giovanni Pontano (1426-1503), and Baldassar Castiglione (1478-1529) are only a few of the more renowned contributors to the discourse on *virtù*.⁶ Yet Machiavelli is the most famous Renaissance figure associated with the term. In the definition of *virtù* in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance*, for example, his name is the only one that is mentioned and discussed.⁷

Since Machiavelli never defines *virtù*, scholars have inquired into its “Machiavellian” meaning by examining the various ways and contexts in which he uses the term. J. H. Whitfield, for example, argues that because Machiavelli’s notions on the topic and his terminology are inconsistent and unsystematic, one should not assume that Machiavelli conceived of *virtù* in moral terms. Indeed, sometimes he uses the term in the sense of moral goodness, synonymous with *bontà* and *onesto* and the opposite of vice (*vizio*) and vileness (*viltà*).⁸ But sometimes Machiavelli also uses it to denote bravery

⁶ Russell Price describes the views of many Italian Renaissance participants in this discussion. See his “The Senses of *Virtù* in Machiavelli,” *European Studies Review* 3:4 (October 1973), 320, n. 20.

⁷ Gordon Campbell, “*virtù*,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 799-800. About a third of this succinct definition of the term is dedicated to Machiavelli’s understanding of it.

⁸ Price divides Machiavelli’s *virtù* into only three categories: moral, military, and political *virtù*. He perceives the last two to be almost identical. With regard to the moral sense of *virtù*, he claims that chapter 15 of *The Prince* demonstrates that Machiavelli used the term to refer to Christian morality. See his “The Senses of *Virtù* in Machiavelli,” 316-19. See also Russell Price, “*virtù*,” in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, vol. 6, ed. Paul F. Grendler (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1999), 276. Price defines the Renaissance concept of *virtù* as the qualities that men should possess when evaluated according to their degree of morality. He goes on to write that the most common sense of the term during the Renaissance, as evident in chapter 15 of *The Prince*, is the opposite of vice (*vizio*). Yet, if we examine carefully all the “good” and “bad” attributes that Machiavelli lists in chapter 15, I believe it becomes apparent that he discusses the conventional categories of moral goodness and not categories of religious morality, certainly not those of

and valor, a life force, and—relying on the Latin sense of *virtus*—manliness and excellence. In the plural, corresponding to the Latin *virtutes*, Machiavelli uses the term to refer to good actions and good qualities. He also borrowed Cicero’s definition of the term and uses *virtù* to denote decisiveness of action, taking a stance on an issue and acting upon it.⁹

Price claims that the latter meaning is Machiavelli’s most common use of the term—he uses it in the context of politics or war to denote the ability to act efficiently. But, unlike Whitefield’s insistence that we ought not think of the word in moral terms, Price argues that in the context of war it implies a ruthlessness that is out of key with the conventions of morality.¹⁰ Indeed, the relationship of *virtù* to actions taken in battle seems very prevalent in Machiavelli’s writings. After examining all of the fifty-three individuals that Machiavelli describes as virtuous in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, Neal Wood concludes that for Machiavelli *virtù* is a set of behaviors and qualities exhibited in either actual military battles or in the wars of politics. War is the most difficult and unpredictable test that a man might face, and “virtuous men” are successful generals who exhibit the same successful characteristics in other social and political situations.¹¹

Christianity. After all, in book two of *Arte della guerra*, Machiavelli writes that Christianity is responsible for the decline of *virtù* in the modern world, because the qualities it designates as virtues in the sense of “good”—mercy, forgiveness—changed the nature of war. The forms that modern conflicts take are mellow in comparison to the conflicts that the ancients experienced and, therefore, they produce less opportunity for the growth of *virtù*. On the issue of Machiavelli’s perception of morality and Christianity, see John M. Najemy, “Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60:4 (1999), 659-81.

⁹ J. H. Whitfield, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947), 92-105.

¹⁰ Price, “*virtù*”, 276.

¹¹ Neal Wood, “Machiavelli’s Concept of *Virtù* Reconsidered,” *Political Studies* 15:2 (1967), 159-72. Price defines this meaning of *virtù* as “political

Political thought—from Aristotle and Plato through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—generally emphasized the importance of order, peace, and stability for the benefits of public life and for the common good. These are the conditions, so it was believed, that are needed for the budding and growth of *virtù*; this is the context that encourages civic and moral virtue. For man to reach his full potential or for a polity to enable its citizens to reach the final good, tranquility is essential. However, Machiavelli points rather to the instability of conflict as the ideal condition for the growth of *virtù*. He argues that republican Rome was the polity with the most *virtù* because of the continuous tumults and class conflicts that contributed to its strength.¹²

Yet defining Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* as ruthlessness—as Price does—is both too vague and too narrowly moralistic. Instead, some other scholars have argued that it is more accurate to define Machiavelli's *virtù* as whatever qualities are needed to maintain the freedom of the state.¹³

and military *virtù* combined.” See “The Senses of *Virtù* in Machiavelli,” 326-31. See also Barbara Spackman, “Politics on the Warpath: Machiavelli's *Art of War*,” in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, eds. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 179-93. She looks at the “Art of War” in semiotic and rhetorical terms, and claims that this is the way that Machiavelli himself would have perceived war: war for him was the continuation of politics. It aims not to break the physical resources of the enemy so much as to construct the appearance of an invincible discourse of power.

¹² Cary J. Nederman and Tathiana V. Gómez, “Between Republic and Monarchy? Liberty, Security, and the Kingdom of France in Machiavelli,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 36 (2002), 82-93. See also Antony Black, “Harmony and Strife in Political Thought c. 1300-1500,” in *Sozialer Wandel im Mittelalter*, ed. Jürgen Miethke and Klaus Schreiner (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1994), 362.

¹³ What that “freedom” means for Machiavelli is also a complex question. On this topic see Whitfield, “On Machiavelli's Use of *Ordini*,” *Italian Studies* 10 (1955), 19-39. He argues that, according to Machiavelli, security from violence and tyranny lead to a life of liberty and these two conditions can only be realized if a state has good and stable *ordini*—the long term institutions or

Machiavelli's explicit purpose in *The Prince*, for example, is to instruct rulers how to acquire and maintain their power under contingent, often unfavorable, circumstances.¹⁴ Accordingly, under this definition, *virtù* is sometimes ruthlessness and cruelty, but, under different circumstances, it is mercy and humaneness.¹⁵

III. The Conditions for a Redemptive *virtù*

Hence, one of the most significant aspects of Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* is its plurality of meanings, a fact which raises the question of whether one can even talk about a Machiavellian concept of *virtù*. Yet the

structures that are essential to the stability and health of a polity and, unlike laws, do not differ radically from one polity to the other. In the almost 1000 instances in which Machiavelli uses this word, *ordini* is always conducive to a *vivere civile e libero* and antagonistic to despotism. J.H Hexter offers a contrasting view of Machiavelli's perception of the freedom of the state. He claims that whenever Machiavelli uses the word *stato* he has in mind political command over men. This is why Machiavelli sometimes describes rulers who only have some of *lo stato*, but not enough of it. The attitude towards the state is exploitative. See his "The Predatory Vision: Niccolò Machiavelli. Il Principe and *lo stato*," in Hexter, *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation: More, Machiavelli, and Seyssel* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 150-72.

¹⁴ J. H. Burns, "Political Thought," in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance* 5, 108-09.

¹⁵ Quentin Skinner claims that overall Machiavelli writes within a well-established tradition of republican thought but that he offers two heterodox ideas concerning republican liberty. The first, appearing in *Discourses* I.4, is that class struggle is conducive to liberty, since it makes citizens more involved in political affairs, and, hence, more virtuous. However, Skinner is incorrect when he equates class struggle with factionalism, something to which Machiavelli strongly objects. Machiavelli's second heterodox idea is that *virtù* and Christianity are incompatible. See Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: The Renaissance*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 3-189 and also his "Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and the Pre-Humanist Origins of Republican Ideas," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, eds. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 121-41.

indeterminacy of the term is precisely the essence of its meaning: in Machiavelli's writings, *virtù* has no inherent value and is only valuable in as much as it fulfills a function. That function is to enable individuals and collectivities to deal with anything in the realm of the possible—with the contingent and unpredictable nature of human reality as well as the indeterminate nature of human language.

If *virtù* is a referent for a medium or a tool that enables survival in the face of the contingent, the unpredictable, and the indeterminate, then *fortuna* is the term that Machiavelli uses to represent these conditions. He constructs *virtù* and *fortuna* as antonyms, as two conflicting powers in the world. The power struggle between the two is gendered: although *virtù* is grammatically feminine, Machiavelli presents it as masculine and *fortuna* as feminine. *Virtù* is not only masculine, but is also the representation of manliness, autonomy, and dominance. *Fortuna* is not only feminine, but is the collection of all ostensibly female vices: fickleness, vengefulness, and eruptive unpredictability.

Chapter 25 of *The Prince* demonstrates how Machiavelli understands the conflict between *virtù* and *fortuna* in gendered terms: he compares *fortuna* to a river that overflows and destroys trees, buildings—everything that stands in its course. Once that river erupts—once *fortuna* is unleashed—it is too late to do anything. However, if one always assumes that the unexpected can happen and prepares in advance for any possibility, then the destructive force of *fortuna* can be stopped. *Fortuna*, Machiavelli continues, erupts when there is no counter force—when there is no *virtù*—to resist her.¹⁶ While *fortuna* is

¹⁶ “dimostra la sua potenza dove non è ordinata *virtù* a resisterla.” Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 1960), 99.

represented as a woman and as a violent force, *virtù* is represented as the masculine force that can counter her, a masculine enforcement of order.¹⁷

However, Machiavelli does more than merely offer a simple depiction of two opposing forces. Rather, he conceptualizes a paradoxical relationship between *virtù* and *fortuna*. In chapter 26 of *The Prince*, he describes in the strongest terms the disastrous and humiliating political position of Italy, but he represents these horrible conditions as fertile ground for *virtù*, as the opportunity for Italy's redemption. This is precisely the context, says Machiavelli, which enables individuals to reach their full potential, develop their *virtù* and act accordingly. The violent conflict that *fortuna* generates provides the *occasione* for a redemptive *virtù*.¹⁸

Wood has noted how in *Discourses* I:1 Machiavelli writes that men act either through necessity or choice. When it is necessary to act because the situation is dire, *virtù* can reach its full potential and overcome idleness (*ozio*).¹⁹ We might say that in Machiavelli's perception of the world necessity is the mother of *virtù*, war and conflict are the mothers of necessity, and *fortuna* is the mother of war and conflict. Ultimately, *virtù* is dependent for its existence on *fortuna*, and thus paradoxically what is meant to be an autonomous masculine power of order requires a female power of chaos.²⁰

¹⁷ "Perché la fortuna è donna; et è necessario, volendola tenere sotto, batterla et urtarla." Machiavelli, *Il principe*, 101.

¹⁸ "Non si debba, adunque, lasciare passare questa occasione, acciò che l'Italia, dopo tanto tempo, vegga uno suo redentore." *Il principe*, 101.

¹⁹ Wood, "Machiavelli's Concept of *Virtù* Reconsidered," 166-67.

²⁰ There has been much discussion about when exactly Machiavelli reconceptualizes *virtù* as a redemptive power that is personified in a prince. Much of the scholarly debate locates this moment in the letter that Machiavelli wrote to Vettori on August 26, 1513. In the letter he discusses the weakness and disunity of Italian arms, their inability to withstand the Swiss army, and he invents the prince—a redemptive figure, the personification of virtue that will

IV. Virtù as a Category of Analysis

Machiavelli's *virtù* constitutes a paradox, and, turning back to chapter 15 of *The Prince*, we can note that he conceives of the world in paradoxes: he lists pairs of presumed virtues and presumed vices and argues that their evaluation as good or bad depends on the specific circumstances in which they are performed. Cruelty, for example, is both bad and good, generosity is both good and bad—they are a thing and its opposite.²¹ It is possible to judge whether these and other qualities are good or bad only by examining the effect they have in specific contexts. The world that Machiavelli perceives and conceives of is one in which things have an indeterminate meaning until certain circumstances transpire. Meaning can only be determined in context—in a world transformed by effects.

Machiavelli's *virtù*, then, is not essentially a descriptive term (a term that describes worthy attributes or behaviors), but an analytical tool of interpretation: by being truly virtuous one can penetrate behind the appearance of things and perceive their effectual truth (*verità effettuale*)—what

be the power that can resist and withstand fortune. For an analysis of the relationship between the letter of August 26 and *The Prince* and for a description of the critical literature on this topic, see John M. Najemy, *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513-1515* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 167-75, esp. 174, note 25.

²¹ John Najemy has noted that Machiavelli does not argue with the conventional evaluation of these categories as virtuous or sinful. Rather, Machiavelli claims that, in contrast to most people who perceive the world through the conventional uses of language or those who are misled by appearances, the truly exceptional individual—the virtuous prince—can go behind the appearance of things and observe the effects that language and actions have on reality. Machiavelli's *virtù* does not belong in the realm of ideals, but in the world as it is. See Najemy, *Between Friends*, 190-92.

things mean in effect. The final end of *virtù* is not glory (as in Roman moral philosophy), or happiness (as in Greek moral philosophy), or salvation of the soul (as in Christian theology), but understanding through interpretation. *Virtù* is an analytical aptitude that certain exceptional individuals have and which allows a specific mode of understanding. This is the skill that the ideal prince has, and this is also the skill that Machiavelli has. Machiavelli's own *virtù* is the paradoxical analytical approach with which he interprets reality and his ability to understand a world of indeterminacies.

Seemingly far removed from the world of power politics, the domestic spaces of *Mandragola* and *Clizia* nonetheless stage some of the same problems concerning *virtù* that other scholars have discerned in *The Prince*. Machiavelli intensely explored the conflict between *virtù* and *fortuna* in his comedies. Yet, as my analysis in the following chapters will show, the exigencies of maternity in a patriarchal world could produce a distinctly feminine *virtù* that challenges the canonical or stereotyped view of Machiavelli's thought.

Chapter one: What is a Mother's Worth? The Negotiation of Motherhood and *Virtù* in Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (1518)

I. The Author¹

Niccolò di Bernardo Machiavelli was born in Florence on May 3, 1469, to his father Bernardo and his mother Bartolomea de' Nelli. The Machiavelli were never among the most important families of the Florentine elite classes, but they were respectable: a member of the family entered the Priorate in 1283, a year after this highest of Florentine executive bodies was established. Nonetheless, by the middle of fifteenth century, the branch of the Machiavelli family to which Niccolò belonged was no longer part of the office-holding class.

Niccolò's father, Bernardo, was a jurist and far from being financially prosperous. Yet he lovingly describes in his diaries the twenty-seven books that he acquired throughout his years—a not insignificant expense for a man of his means. It appears that he had ties with a few the most important Florentine humanists, and he made sure that Niccolò's education followed the prevalent humanist pedagogical precepts. At the age of seven, therefore, Niccolò began to study Latin grammar, at the age of ten he was learning the

¹ For the biographical sketch of Machiavelli, I rely mostly on Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Cecil Grayson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1-14 and Ugo Dotti, *Machiavelli rivoluzionario: vita e opera* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2003), 23-39.

abacus, and at the age of twelve he was studying Latin composition. He was never trained to become a professional humanist (for example, he did not study Greek), yet he participated in the intellectual circles of Florence enough so that in 1498 he was elected to serve as the head of the second Chancery (the humanist Marcello Adriani was Chancellor at that time).

Machiavelli was fired from office in 1512, when the Medici returned to Florence with the help of the Spanish army. The republican constitution was dismantled, Piero Soderini (Florence's gonfaloniere for life from 1502 to 1512) was deposed, and, most probably due to his close association with Soderini, Machiavelli never regained his post in the chancery or his other offices.

II. The Play

La Mandragola is one of the earliest and most popular examples of Renaissance *commedia erudita*. It is generally accepted today that Machiavelli composed it in 1518, the same year in which it may have been first performed.² Scholars debate some of the circumstances concerning its first performance, but what is certain is that it was performed in a private setting in Florence by an amateur company.³ The play became extremely popular

² For the three schools of thought concerning the date of composition (i.e., 1504, 1512-1520, 1504-1512), see Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, *The Birth of Modern Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 117-18.

³ Alessandro Parronchi claimed that *Mandragola* was composed specifically for a performance at Palazzo Medici in September 1518 as part of the celebrations of Lorenzo de' Medici's return from France with his bride Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne. See his "La prima rappresentazione della 'Mandragola,'" *La Bibliofilia* 64:1 (1962), 37-86. Ridolfi believes it was written for the Carnival season in 1518, i.e., sometime between mid-January and mid-February. See his "Composizione, rappresentazione, e prima edizione della 'Mandragola,'" *La Bibliofilia* 64:3 (1962), 285-94.

already during Machiavelli's lifetime, and after its Florentine performance in 1518 it was also performed to great acclaim in Rome and Venice.⁴ But the extent of its popularity is perhaps better attested by the fact that it was printed three times during the 1520s and numerous times thereafter.⁵

In *La Mandragola*, Nicia, the elderly husband of Lucrezia, is anxious to have a son by his young wife. Callimaco, a young Florentine who has been living in France since 1494, hears praise of Lucrezia's beauty and falls in love with her. He arrives in Florence with the goal of possessing her one way or another, but finds that the task is harder than expected: Lucrezia is such a virtuous woman and wife that he has no access to her. Ligurio, who used to be a marriage broker, assists Callimaco in devising a plan that will enable him to seduce Lucrezia: Callimaco disguises himself as a physician and convinces Nicia that, if his wife takes a potion made out of the mandrake root, she will get pregnant. Nicia is told, however, that the mandrake is so potent that the first man who has sex with Lucrezia after she has taken the potion will die. The problem is solved by capturing a young nobody off the street and "forcing" him to make love to Lucrezia, so that Nicia can then safely go about trying to

⁴ For more details see Ireneo Sanesi, *Storia dei generi letterari italiani: la commedia I* (Milan: F. Vallardi, 1954), 266.

⁵ Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 51. Andrews counted 15 editions up to 1630. This makes *Mandragola* the seventh most popular erudite comedy. The most popular, Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena's *Calandra* (published in 1521), was printed 22 times. On the ways in which *Mandragola* is unique among erudite comedies in its divergence from classical and Renaissance conventions of content and plot structure, see *Scripts and Scenarios*, 52-53. Herrick, on the other hand, claimed that, although the play is not based on any specific Roman comedy, its structure follows closely that of classical comedies. See Marvin T. Herrick, *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 80.

impregnate his wife. The young man is, of course, Callimaco in disguise. Thus, with the help of Nicia, Ligurio, the local friar Timoteo (who is promised a fee in return for his help), and Lucrezia's mother Sostrata, Callimaco finally gains access to Lucrezia, who is so overpowered by Callimaco's charms, so he informs us, that she happily agrees to see him on a permanent basis. The next morning we see a happy Nicia, who is certain he will father a son in no time. All the other characters also seem to have found that their needs have been met as well: Callimaco obtains the object of his desire, Lucrezia gains sexual freedom, Sostrata the assurance that her daughter will be secure in her old age, Fra Timoteo money, and Ligurio the satisfaction of seeing his strategy bear fruit.

Mandragola tells the story of the elderly Nicia who is anxious to have a son by his young wife, Lucrezia; it is the story of the young Callimaco who wishes to possess Lucrezia, but finds that her female virtue makes the task harder than expected; it is the story of the ex-marriage broker, Ligurio, who comes up with a plan that will ultimately enable Callimaco to seduce Lucrezia. The plot can thus be understood as a narrative of male desire: Nicia desires to become a father; Callimaco desires Lucrezia; Ligurio desires to demonstrate his own cleverness; and Fra Timoteo desires money. It is important to note that Nicia has an object of desire, since interpretations of *Mandragola* tend on the whole to analyze Nicia's character as if he were merely an old, asexual man. Nicia's failure to impregnate his wife, and the ridicule he receives for that from the other male characters no doubt facilitate this interpretation. However,

this should not obscure the fact that Nicia is a passionate man with an active libido.⁶

The reading I offer in this chapter argues that *Mandragola* problematizes the phenomena of womanhood, motherhood, and *virtù* in the context of male desire. There are four women in this play—Sostrata, Lucrezia, a woman who appears in one scene at a church, and the Virgin Mary—and three of them are valued in terms of their motherhood. Ultimately, in *Mandragola* the men can attain their objects of desire only when these women perform as mothers.⁷

⁶ The primary usage of the term “libido” refers to sexual desire, but in Jung’s work, it has a broader meaning: it is the psychic and creative force used in the process of individuation, the processes of striving and desire. In this chapter I refer to both meanings. See, for example, Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 697. Old men are never denied a libido, a passion, in the Renaissance *commedia erudite*. On the contrary, the *vecchio* can be made to learn a lesson exactly because he is in possession of a libido. It is the object towards which the libido is directed which is presented as inappropriate: the old man usually desires wealth, or young women, or both.

⁷ Scholars have written about the ways in which Machiavelli examines in *Mandragola* the nature of *virtù* and its corruption in his times; the potential for *virtù* within the modern family; and the relationship between this family and the broader social and political sphere. The bibliography that follows is only a limited sample from the vast literature that examines these issues in *Mandragola*: Ronald L. Martinez, “The Pharmacy of Machiavelli: Roman Lucretia in *Mandragola*,” *Renaissance Drama as Cultural History: Essays from Renaissance Drama 1977-1987*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Evanston: Northwestern University Press: 1990), 31-73, in which Martinez claims that the ironic reversals between Livy’s story of Lucretia and Machiavelli’s Lucrezia make *Mandragola* a dystopia of civic *virtù*. Robin Kirkpatrick compares Machiavelli’s *virtù* to Castiglione’s *sprezzatura*: neither ever received a formal definition, both are attributes to be used in the social and political realm, and both require dissimulation and self-presentation; in short, Kirkpatrick agrees with Victoria Kahn that Machiavelli’s *virtù* is a performing, theatrical quality and that his texts, including *Mandragola*, are meant to enable his reader to perform his *virtù*. See Kirkpatrick’s *English and Italian Literature from Dante to Shakespeare: A Study of Source, Analogue and Divergence* (London and New

III. Maternal Sexuality

An examination of the mother-characters in *Mandragola* reveals that it is not only the men who possess a libido. Women were commonly perceived as inclined to be more sexual than men and it was thought that women who had experienced the pleasures of the body and become sexually active were almost incapable of containing their sexual desires. As Klapisch-Zuber notes, any woman alone, especially a widow, was suspect: since widows had tasted carnal pleasure, society feared that they might fall into depravity.⁸ In *Mandragola*, the men ascribe to Sostrata, Lucrezia's widowed mother, this

York: Longman, 1995), 99-109, 209; and Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-27. For other noteworthy examinations of Machiavelli's conceptualization of *virtù* in both the political and literary works, see Michael Harvey, "Lost in the Wilderness: Love and Longing in *L'asino*," in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works*, ed. Vickie B. Sullivan (New Haven: Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 120-37; Melissa M. Matthes, *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Giulio Ferroni, "Mutazione" e "ricontro" nel teatro di Machiavelli e altri saggi sulla commedia del Cinquecento (Rome: Bulzoni, 1972); M.J. Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle: Essays on Drama and Community* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), 85-126.

⁸ Klapisch-Zuber, "The 'Cruel Mother': Maternity, Widowhood and Dowry in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 117-31 (119). See also Louise Mirrer, "Introduction," *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 1-2. The best known work of the period on the nature of widows, the dangers they present, and how they should behave is probably Girolamo Savonarola's *Libro della vita viduale* (1491), in Girolamo Savonarola, *Operette spirituali*, vol. I, ed. Mario Ferrara (Roma: A. Belardetti, 1976). For Renaissance perceptions of the uncontrollable sexual nature of women, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top," *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays by Natalie Zemon Davis* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975), 124-51. See also Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 41-42.

female excess of sexuality. They depict her as a typical widow who, having been sexually active as a wife, finds it difficult to refrain from sex. Callimaco explains to his servant Siro that he hopes to gain access to, and seduce, Lucrezia, with the help of her mother “who used to play around a bit when she was younger.”⁹

Indeed, Sostrata is anything but an isolated and chaste widow and does not even avoid male company. Ligurio names her as one of his acquaintances (II:6), and since they are not related, her association and contact with him would be perceived as indiscrete.¹⁰ Moreover, as we shall see, Sostrata views the sexual contact Lucrezia will have with a stranger as an unexpected benefit and seems to easily dismiss Lucrezia’s conventional moral qualms.

IV. Maternal Virtù

1. Virtù, Astuteness and *Occasione*

In fact, Sostrata exhibits at least one of the most important characteristics that Machiavelli wished his ideal prince to possess: she dismisses conventional virtue—the fidelity and chastity of a married woman—and instead looks at the practical effects of one’s behavior.¹¹ If Lucrezia

⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, in *The Comedies of Machiavelli: The Woman from Andros, The Mandrake, Clizia; Bilingual Edition*, eds. and trans. David Sices and James B. Atkinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), 168. “la sua madre è suta buona compagna.” *Mandragola*, I:1. Throughout this chapter, the quotations in Italian from *Mandragola* are also from the bilingual edition of Sices and Atkinson. For the Italian, I provide the act and scene without the page numbers. This information should suffice for readers who wish to locate the passages in other editions of the play.

¹⁰ In practice, of course, widows remained in social contact with non-relative males. Alessandra Strozzi is perhaps the best known example of that. But prescriptive literature portrayed the ideal widow differently.

¹¹ See chapters 15-18 of *The Prince*.

agrees to the plan and admits a stranger to her bed, she will become pregnant and will thus have taken care of her future. In chapter eighteen of *The Prince*, Machiavelli portrays the ideal ruler as able to exert brute, explicit power as well as political maneuvers and diplomatic tricks—he portrays the ruler as both a lion and a fox. Sostrata does not possess the brute force of the lion, but she certainly performs the role of the fox:¹² she knows how to manipulate and get others, in this case her daughter, to follow her advice, and she certainly recognizes and knows how to take advantage of a good opportunity. Not unlike Machiavelli's ideal prince, she recognizes an *occasione*—i.e., the encouragement that Lucrezia receives from her own husband and priest to have sexual relations with a stranger—and the practical effects that can derive from it.

In chapter twenty-five of *The Prince*, however, Machiavelli explains that his ideal ruler must not only recognize and use the opportunities he encounters but must also take preventive measures. He compares Fortune to a river and advises the ruler to prepare dykes for the time when the river overflows. Sostrata appears to perform well in this regard as well, as one who knows how to fight fortune by being astute, by recognizing the danger to come, and by preparing the necessary weapons ahead of time. The danger to come, as she explains to her daughter in III:11, is that when Nicia dies she will become an isolated widow with no one to care for her in old age. The solution is having children; the opportunity is Nicia's insistence on the mandrake plan. Even this widow's sexuality (how she describes sex outside the context of matrimony and procreation as explicitly enjoyable) contributes to her construction as possessing *virtù*: Machiavelli's prince does not merely outwit

¹² See chapter 18 of *The Prince*.

fortune, but also conquers her as a man would a woman; he is sexually active.¹³

Generational tensions are a convention in the genre of erudite comedy, and it is not surprising that the young characters in *Mandragola* poke fun at both Sostrata and Nicia. But whereas Nicia is ridiculed as an impotent old man because his sexuality is denied, Sostrata is (de)famed, but by no means ridiculed, for being a sexual old woman. Note, for example, the way in which Nicia is ridiculed in the *canzone* which follows the second act:

[...]

Our lawyer's such a guy, mad for begattin';
He'd think an ass can fly, if told in Latin.
No other riches count, despite the bother:
He'll gladly trade his mount, to be a father.¹⁴

Questo vostro dottore,
bramando aver figlioli,
credria ch'un asin voli;
a qualunque altro ben posto ha in oblio,
e solo in questo ha posto il suo disio.

Mandragola presents its audience with such a subversion of patriarchal values that a husband is ridiculed and humiliated due to a longing to become, literally,

¹³ See chapter 25 in *The Prince*: "Fortune is a woman and it is necessary, in order to keep her under, to cuff and maul her." Allan Gilbert, (trans.), *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, Vol. I (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1989), 92.

¹⁴ *The Comedies*, 201.

a patriarch, while a mother exhibits *virtù* exactly when she performs the typical negative image of a shrewd, unchaste woman.

2. Virtù as Action and Effect

Sostrata is the facilitator, the enabler in the play. She is the prime mover, since she is the one who manages to convince Lucrezia that the plan is to her advantage. The new domestic arrangement established at the end of the play is made possible, ultimately, by her influence and effect on the progress of events. In doing so, Sostrata fulfills a central maternal function—as exemplified by the sacred maternal role model, Mary—that of the *mediatrix*. She mediates between the men and her daughter.

When there is doubt as to whether Lucrezia will agree to go and see a priest who will sanction the unchaste act of a married woman engaging in sex with a strange man, Ligurio immediately instructs Nicia to take her to her mother. Indeed, Nicia acknowledges that Lucrezia always trusts her mother.¹⁵ As we noted above, Callimaco hopes to succeed in seducing Lucrezia because of Sostrata's "outgoing," loose character. Fra Timoteo asserts that Sostrata would be of great help to him in stirring Lucrezia according to his will. Most of all, when asked by Callimaco to describe what Sostrata did to facilitate the execution of their plan, Ligurio tells him that Sostrata managed

practically the whole thing. When she heard that her daughter could have such a good night of it without any sin, she never left off begging, bullying and reassuring Lucrezia until she had gotten her to see the friar, and then she managed things so that her daughter gave in.¹⁶

¹⁵ "La [Lucrezia] le [Sostrata] presta fede." *Mandragola*, II:6.

¹⁶ *The Comedies*, 235.

Quasi el tutto. Come la 'ntese che la sua figliuola aveva avere questa buona notte senza peccato, la non restò mai di pregare, comandare, confortare la Lucrezia, tanto che ella la condusse al frate, e quivi operò in modo, che la li consentì. (IV:2)

Sostrata, therefore, exhibits the two attributes that Machiavelli wants an ideal prince to have: she is an astute observer, who recognizes the right occasion and the opportunities it provides in planning for the future, and, at the same time, she is a woman of action—she is the one who conquers Lucrezia's reluctance and brings down her defenses.

Ligurio acknowledges that Sostrata executed the lion's share of the plan and that she was the reason for Lucrezia's submission. He describes Sostrata's help with three successive verbs (*pregare, comandare, confortare*) and thus portrays her as a mover, a doer, an active player. More than that, the tenor of these specific verbs places this mother almost in the position of Lucrezia's confessor who will also need to beg, command, and reassure her. By contrast, Ligurio, while he might be the mastermind behind the plan to seduce Lucrezia and dupe Nicia, is not a man of action, and he becomes passive role once his plan is accomplished. Throughout the play Callimaco is the one who asks, and Ligurio the one who advises and instructs. But when the plan comes to fruition, the nature of their relationship changes and for the first time Ligurio asks Callimaco for instructions:

Ligurio: I'm overjoyed at all your good fortune. Everything has turned out just as I had predicted. Now what do we do?

Callimaco: Let's walk towards the church, because I promised I would be there when she arrives with her mother and Messer Nicia.¹⁷

¹⁷ *The Comedies*, 269.

Ligurio: lo ho gran piacere d'ogni tuo bene, ed ètti intervenuto quello che io ti dissi appunto. Ma che facciàn noi ora?

Callimaco: Andian verso la chiesa, perché io le promissi d'essere là, dove la verrà lei, la madre ed il dottore. (V:4)

3. *Virtù*, Desire, and Sexuality

The men in the play—Ligurio, Callimaco and Timoteo—perceive Sostrata as a woman of loose character. However, whereas the sexuality of women was perceived as dangerous to the social and political order—and even more so in the case of the sexuality of widows who already know the pleasures of carnal knowledge—the men in *Mandragola* do not attempt to correct and contain Sostrata's assumed lustful, sexual nature. Callimaco, who wishes to seduce Lucrezia, and Ligurio, the ex-matchmaker turned pimp, use this trait which they view as an advantage, not a flaw: the mother, precisely because she is unchaste, precisely because of her carnal nature, agrees to convince her daughter to have a “one night stand” with a stranger.

In the world of *Mandragola* the men do not censure, but rather encourage, the sexual nature of this mother. Renaissance religious and cultural discourse offered role models of virtuous mothers, but according to these models the virtue of motherhood often meant the denial of sexual female bodies. Mary, the exemplar of the universal, virtuous mother who gives life and nourishes, is asexual and virginal. Clarissa Atkinson argues that in the construction of motherhood in Christian society, there was a sharp distinction between spiritual and physical motherhood: the former determined spiritual health and, paradoxically, meant the abuse and starvation of the body,

conditions that make it physically difficult to become a mother.¹⁸ In this discourse, the ideal image of maternity is feminine, but by no means is it (sexually) female.

While in prescriptive literature the sexuality of the mother is disciplined and censured, it is actually encouraged in the world of *Mandragola*: the men value Sostrata as an asset that promotes their own interests precisely because she is unchaste. By enjoying this mother's lewd ways and not attempting to discipline female sexuality, and worse still, by encouraging the virtuous Lucrezia to have sex with a man other than her husband, the men in *Mandragola* betray their roles to instruct "their women" and discipline their sexual natures. Nicia, as a husband and a future father, betrays his patriarchal responsibilities. Paradoxically, it is his obsession with becoming a father, i.e., a

¹⁸ Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 240-41. See also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Bynum also argues that religious discourse offered positive perceptions of the maternal body: for example, Cistercian devotion utilized images of the womb and the feeding breast as metaphors of God's unfailing love and his care and forgiveness towards his naughty, sinful children. See Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 112-15, 160-64. I believe that even when the Cistercians were using a representation of the maternal body the female body was actually negated: it is not the breast or the womb that is being praised, after all, but the virtues they are supposed to stand for, i.e., nourishment, forgiveness, etc. In religious discourse, including that which Bynum discusses, the maternal body was appropriated in order to denote God's mother-like love of his faithful children, but it is spiritual motherhood that is being praised. And, in the process, the maternal body is cleansed of its femaleness. Marilyn Yalom makes similar claims when she notes how, although the Biblical use of the term El Shaddai – God of the breast, or God who suckles – is to be understood metaphorically, it is still a masculine appropriation of a fundamentally female attribute. See Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 27.

patriarch, which leads him to effect his own cuckolding. Nicia ultimately guarantees that he will not be the biological father of his heir.

V. The Corruption of Masculine *Virtù*, *Ordini*, and Virility

Machiavelli underscores the failure of the men to become fathers and their dysfunction within the framework of patriarchy in one more way. Nicia is not only the husband of Lucrezia, but also a lawyer. Timoteo, who is bribed to sanction Lucrezia's extramarital sex, is the friar of the local church. In this way, two of the *ordini*¹⁹ that Machiavelli insists are crucial for the foundation and maintenance of the civic realm—law and religion—partake in the corruption of a chaste woman. In addition, all of the male characters in the world of *Mandragola* lack experience in the third *ordine* that Machiavelli perceives as crucial for maintaining any type of polity, i.e., arms.

This ignorance is depicted in IV:9 in a highly amusing, slapstick-like fashion: since the men wish to fool Nicia into allowing Callimaco entrance to Lucrezia's bed, they pretend to kidnap a man (Callimaco in disguise) who will be forced to sleep with Lucrezia, so that the poisonous effect of the mandrake will be dissolved. When the men gather at night, Nicia, who is the only one who takes the charade seriously, looks ridiculous in a jacket that is much too small for his size, a fur hat, and a tiny sword.²⁰ Nicia must have formed quite a sight on stage. The men keep bumping into each other in the dark, scaring each other while supposedly trying to abduct a young man. Ligurio even uses military terminology to describe a "battle" that will get a married and chaste woman to cuckold her husband:

¹⁹ The three essential *ordini* that Machiavelli emphasizes most often are religion, law, and arms.

²⁰ No doubt a phallic allusion.

I'll be the commanding officer, and lead the patrol in tonight's action. I will assign the right column [in Italian, literally a horn] to Callimaco, the left to myself, and Messer Nicia here will stick between the columns, with Siro bringing up the rear to stiffen up any column if it threatens to go limp. The password will be Saint Cuckoo.²¹

Io voglio essere el capitano, ed ordinare l'essercito per la giornata. Al destro corno sia preposto Callimaco, al sinistro io, intra le dua corna starà qui el dottore; Siro fia retroguardo, per dar sussidio a quella banda che inclinassi. El nome sia san Cuccù.

The whole battle scene is a sham and a farce, and the military terminology turns the scene into irony.

But Machiavelli does not portray merely the elderly husband as inept in arms. This lack of virility runs even deeper. For example, the young protagonist Callimaco is described in the prologue in the most flattering terms:

Of all our rich young bloods, in truth
He bears himself most decently,
and merits honor and esteem.²²

Yet, while Callimaco is depicted in this way, and, although he himself often uses military terminology to compare his desire for Lucrezia to a war to be won,²³ he is not so brave and virile: while the cities of Italy were facing

²¹ *The Comedies*, 252-53.

²² *The Comedies*, 157. "Costui, fra tutti gli altri buon compagno, a' segni ed a' vestigi l'onor di gentilezza e pregio porta." (prologo)

²³ See for example how in I:1 Callimaco describes his difficulties in persuading Lucrezia to cuckold her husband in these terms: "In prima mi fa guerra la natura di lei"; Sices and Atkinson, *The Comedies*, 166. See also how in IV:1, Callimaco describes what it feels like to feel desire: "da ogni parte mi assalta tanto desio d'essere una volta con costei [Lucrezia]." Desire is

invading forces, this dashing young man made sure to keep himself safe in France. Apparently, Callimaco is so genteel that he cannot perform on the battle field, but can only play the warrior in the war games of the urban elites²⁴; he directs his valor not to the protection of the *patria*, but to the conquering of the *femina*. In short, no military valor and no *virtù* are attributed to any of the male characters in *Mandragola*.

The men in *Mandragola* exhibit little manliness: none of them is virile (not even the young Callimaco)²⁵; Nicia fails as a husband when he does not safeguard the chastity of his wife and his own honor as well as when he fails

described as a violent act, an assault. *The Comedies*, 230. Hanna Pitkin discusses the “love as war” theme in Machiavelli’s thought in *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 115-18; Herrick notes that while in Plautus’s *Casina* the prevailing metaphor for love is food, in Machiavelli’s *Clizia* it is war; see his *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance*, 45. On military terminology in *Mandragola*, see Martinez, “The Pharmacy of Machiavelli,” 12-13, and his “Benefit of Absence: Machiavellian Valediction in *Clizia*,” *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, eds. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 117-44 (118-19).

²⁴ Scholars have noted how during the Renaissance military valor as a sign of masculinity diminished in importance. For example, in book I of *Il Cortigiano* Castiglione’s perfect courtier hunts and plays at sports in order to be efficient in the use of arms. However, he seems to be playing at war with the same *sprezzatura* with which he is meant to perform all his other activities, and Castiglione does not depict a courtier who is actually in the battlefield. It is evident from the large space Machiavelli devotes to arms in *The Prince* (and, in fact, in most of his writings) that his man of *virtù* does not merely practice for war, but is actually on the battlefield. For changing perceptions during the Renaissance of the meaning of being a gentleman, of nobility and civility, see Lauro Martines, “The Gentleman in Renaissance Italy,” *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance*, ed. Robert S. Kinsman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 77-93; On Castiglione’s perception of the perfect courtier and his relation to age and virility, see Maria Teresa Ricci, “Old Age in Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*,” *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Erin Campbell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 57-73.

²⁵ Radcliff-Umstead provides a positive analysis of Callimaco’s character, with which I disagree, depicting him as one of the young rulers of *The Prince*. See Radcliff-Umstead, *The Birth of Modern Comedy*, 123-25.

to instruct and inspire Lucrezia; Ligurio indeed exhibits the astuteness of an experienced man, but he has no actual power or authority and, thus, no formal voice in the male networks that constitute the social and political realm. Timoteo, as a representative of the church, betrays his responsibilities as Lucrezia's spiritual father.²⁶ Moreover, the *ordini* of law, religion, and arms that function in Machiavelli's thought as the backbone of the civic realm (which is always the realm of men)²⁷ are complicit in the sexual and moral corruption of Lucrezia. In short, none of the men stands up to the images of manliness, power, authority, and responsibility that the patriarchal discourse of Renaissance Italy constructed. From this vantage point, I turn to examine the ways in which these failed patriarchs relate to mothers and motherhood.

VI. The Utilization of Motherhood

1. Sostrata in the Service of Male Interest

All the men in *Mandragola* attempt to use motherhood to advance their own interests. Callimaco, who desires to seduce Lucrezia, tells his servant Siro that he has little hope of succeeding, but lists three elements that will facilitate the attainment of his desire:

²⁶ See III:11 where Timoteo refers to Lucrezia as "my daughter" (*figliuola mia*). I believe it is significant that he uses this term only at the very end of his part in the scene, after Lucrezia has been persuaded. Until then, he refers to her solely as Madonna Lucrezia. Once Lucrezia has been convinced, her social status doesn't matter to the friar: she has submitted to him.

²⁷ Diane Owen Hughes notes that a civil legal status was withheld from women in *Digest* 50.17.2., a much referred to passage of Roman law during the late Middle-Ages and the Renaissance. See her "Invisible Madonnas? The Italian Historiographical Tradition and the Women of Medieval Italy," in *Women in Medieval History and Historiography*, ed. Susan M. Stuard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 25-58 (25-26).

[...] first, the stupidity her husband, Messer Nicia who, although he is a Doctor of Laws, is the simplest and most foolish man in all Florence. Second, the desire of both of them for children; they have been married for six years now without having any, and since they are rich, they are dying to have an heir. There is a third reason, too: her mother; she used to play around a bit when she was younger. But now she is well-to-do, so I don't know how to take advantage of that.²⁸

l'una, la semplicità di messer Nicia, che, benché sia dottore, egli è el più semplice ed el più sciocco uomo di Firenze; l'altra, la voglia che lui e lei hanno di avere figliuoli, che, sendo stata sei anni a marito e non avendo ancora fatti, ne hanno, sendo ricchissimi, un desiderio che muoiono. Una terza ci è, che la sua madre è suta buona compagna, ma la è ricca, tale che io non so come governarmene. (I:1)

In effect, Callimaco perceives motherhood as a weakness that he can use to conquer Lucrezia: two of the three elements that he mentions employ motherhood as a tool of corruption. First, he intends to take advantage of what he perceives to be Lucrezia's desire to become a mother and have an heir.²⁹ Second, his perception of Sostrata's moral character leads him to believe that he can use the mother-daughter relationship to advance his own interests. As we have seen, Nicia, Ligurio, and Fra Timoteo also discuss the ways in which Sostrata—in her capacity as Lucrezia's mother and given the influence she

²⁸ *The Comedies*, 169.

²⁹ Of course, Callimaco is in fact describing Nicia's desire and not the desires of Lucrezia: in I:2, Nicia tells Ligurio that he wants to have children, and in III:8 he is anxious to get Ligurio to promise that he will have a male child, an heir.

has on her daughter—can be used to advance their interests, while overturning conventional patriarchal morality and honor.

2. The Virgin Mary in the Service of Male Interest

But more than that, in *Mandragola* using the mother and associating corruption with motherhood moves from the performance of a specific mother to the universal Mother. In V:1, Fra Timoteo complains that worship of the Madonna in his church has diminished:

I changed the veil on a miraculous statue of the Virgin. How many times have I told those friars to keep her well cleaned! And then they wonder why attendance is going down. I remember when there were five hundred holy images, and nowadays there are barely twenty. It's all our own fault, because we haven't been smart enough to keep up the publicity.³⁰

[...] mutai un velo ad una Nostra Donna, che fa miracoli. Quante volte ho io detto a questi frati che la tenghino pulita! E si maravigliono poi se la divozione manca! Io mi ricordo esservi cinquecento imagine, e non ve ne sono oggi venti: questo nasce da noi, che non le abbiamo saputa mantenere la reputazione. (V:1)

The friar admits that the responsibility for the decreased devotion to the Madonna lies with him and the other friars of his church, since they did not keep up her “reputation” (“la reputazione”). This reputation can be understood in terms of her fame and publicity as the mother of Christ and a miracle worker.³¹ But it can also be understood as her honor,³² and once a woman’s

³⁰ *The Comedies*, 259.

³¹ I.e., her *fama*: the term with which Callimaco describes Lucrezia in I:1.

reputation in this sense is questioned, she is doomed.³³ Does Timoteo mean that the honor of the Madonna was damaged? And in what sense is it his fault?

It is important to note that Ligurio asks Timoteo to help in persuading Lucrezia only after he has confirmed the level of the friar's corruption: initially, he pretends to ask Timoteo to pressure an abbess into letting a girl under her charge have an abortion. In both instances the friar is tested on issues concerning motherhood: he agrees to facilitate ending a girl's motherhood just as easily as he agrees to facilitate a process that will lead to the motherhood of another. Motherhood, either its ending or its conception, has a purely monetary value for Timoteo.

In his attempts to persuade Lucrezia, Timoteo makes one more significant comment that refers to the Madonna:

I swear to you, my lady [*madonna*], by this consecrated breast, that there is no more sin in obeying your husband in this case than there is in eating meat on Wednesday, and that is a sin that a little holy water can wash away.³⁴

³² "Reputazione," *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana XV*, eds. Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti and Salvatore Battaglia (Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1990), 847-49.

³³ See, for example, what Castiglione makes Giuliano de' Medici say: "[The court lady] must also be more circumspect and at greater pains to avoid giving an excuse for someone to speak ill of her; she should not only be beyond reproach but also beyond even suspicion, for a woman lacks a man's resources when it comes to defending herself." Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (New York & London: Penguin Books, 2003), 211.

³⁴ *The Comedies*, 225.

lo vi guiro, Madonna, per questo petto sacrato, che 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. (III:11)

At the end of the scene, after agreeing to the plan, Lucrezia prays that “May God and Our Lady help me, and keep me from harm.”³⁵ This scene strongly emphasizes the immorality of the friar who sets out to convince a married woman that it is not a sin to have sex with a strange man, who will also most probably die after the act. This scene, moreover, underscores the friar’s hypocrisy: since Timoteo informed us that the church has a miracle-working image of the Madonna, and since he swears on a sacred breast, we can safely assume that the whole scene takes place in front of *Maria lactans*, an image of the Madonna baring one breast while breastfeeding her son. Also significant is that Timoteo’s church is probably Santissima Annunziata, because it housed a most venerated painting of the Annunciation. During Machiavelli’s time, Florentine brides traditionally visited the church on the day before their wedding to leave their bouquets and pray that they will provide their husbands with a healthy child.³⁶ The space in which Timoteo and Sostrata negotiate with Lucrezia about her motherhood, therefore, is highly invested with the symbolism of maternity.³⁷

³⁵ “Dio m’aiuti a la Nostra Donna, che io non càpiti male.” *Mandragola*, III:11.

³⁶ Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 146, 186 (note 121).

³⁷ Some scholars question whether the church in *Mandragola* is Santissima Annunziata. For example, Giorgio Inglese argues that it is probably Santa Maria Novella. See his “*Mandragola* di Niccolò Machiavelli,” in *Letteratura Italiana: Le Opere*. vol. I: *Dalle origini al Cinquecento*, ed. Alberto Asor Rosa (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1992), 1013n. Jane Tylus, however, assumes that the church is Santissima Annunziata. See her “Theatre and Its Social Uses:

The central figure in the discourse on the virtue of motherhood was Mary, the mother of Christ. Geraldine Johnson claims that, by the second half of the fifteenth century, the notion of the *imitatio Mariae* was expressed enthusiastically through the unprecedented peak in the production and consumption of sculpted reliefs of the Madonna and Child. These images, she claims, were purchased by grooms during the buying frenzy that took place just before and after the marriage. They were placed in the bedroom that contained the nuptial bed. These three-dimensional images served the dynastic interests of the husbands by presenting young brides and mothers with models of the perfect mother and bride.³⁸

The importance of Mary's maternity is further confirmed by the growing popularity of the *Madonna del latte*. The veneration of this image can be traced back to the twelfth century,³⁹ and during the fifteenth and the early

Machiavelli's *Mandragola* and the Spectacle of Infamy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53:3 (Autumn, 2000), 675, 678. If the readers and audience during Machiavelli's time did not associate the church in the play with Santissima Annunziata, then the point made above concerning brides at their wedding night might seem irrelevant. However, even if the church is Santa Maria Novella and not Santissima Annunziata, it is still a church dedicated to the Madonna that holds, as Ligurio notes, a sacred image of the Madonna. Therefore, it is more than reasonable to assume that the church would attract those praying for marriages, fertility, childbearing, and such similar concerns.

³⁸ Geraldine A. Johnson, "Beautiful Brides and Model Mothers: The Devotional and Talismanic Functions of Early Modern Marian Reliefs," in *The Material Culture of Sex, Procreation and Marriage in Premodern Europe*, ed. A.L. McClanan and K.R. Encarnación (New York: Palgrave Press, 2002), 135-61.

³⁹ The foundational survey of this pictorial theme is still that of Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in Mid-Fourteenth Century* (1951; reprint ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 132-56. See also his "Madonna of Humility," *The Art Bulletin* 18:4 (Dec. 1936), 435-65. Giuseppe Tartaro claims that the tremendous popularity of Mary's milk began when the idea of pilgrimages and crusades to the holy places in the East failed to draw enough people. As a consequence, alternative sacred routes for pilgrimage were

sixteenth centuries there was a significant increase in religious cults that utilized images in which Mary's exposed breast is the central object.⁴⁰ By the fifteenth-century there were numerous localities which venerated the *Madonna del latte* and claimed to have in their possession relics of her breast milk.⁴¹ In fact, so many localities claimed to have this relic that in a sermon of 1427 Bernardino of Siena says that unless Mary was milked like a cow all over the place, he believes she had just enough milk for the benefit of Jesus.⁴²

This ironic remark by Bernardino alludes to the ways in which Mary's milk was perceived by the localities that claimed to have it as a valued

designated in the territories of Tuscany and Umbria to provide the faithful with a way of experiencing the physical surroundings in which Jesus lived, and relics of the milk Jesus consumed were important markers of his physical existence. See Giuseppe Tartaro, *Dabo tibi ubera mea: Pietà popolare e universi simbolici. La Madonna del latte di Montevarchi attraverso i secoli* (Firenze: Feeria, 2004), 44-46. For a comprehensive history of religious doctrine, thought and iconography of the *Maria lactans*, see the wonderful work of Gian Paolo Bonani and Serena Baldassarre Bonani, *Maria Lactans, Scripta pontificiae facultatis theologicae "Marianum" 49* (Rome: Edizioni "Marianum", 1995). For insightful suggestions about the ways in which this image was experienced by Italians, see Yalom, *A History of the Breast*, 40-41.

⁴⁰ Megan Holmes, "Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art," *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, eds. Geraldine Johnson and Sara Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 167-95 (191.)

⁴¹ Giuliano Pinto, "presentazione," in Tartaro, *Dabo tibi*, 7.

⁴² Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche volgari sul Campo di Siena, 1427*, ed. C. Delcorno (Milan: Rusconi, 1989), 809-10. This veneration of the Virgin's milk stems partly from the belief that milk and blood are the same substance: milk was produced from the mother's blood to feed her baby. Hence the Virgin's milk was almost as powerful and holy a relic as Christ's blood. Caroline Bynum demonstrated how in religious painting and literature there is a parallel between the blood coming out of Christ's wounds and the milk coming out of Mary's breasts. See Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 269-76. On miracles attributed to the Madonna's milk, such as the milk she gave Fulbert at Chartres, see M.V. Gripkey, *The Blessed Virgin Mary as Mediatrix in the Latin and Old French Legend Prior to the Fourteenth Century* (Washington D.C: The Catholic University of America, 1938).

commodity that could bring high profits, both spiritually (the locality would become a station in Europe's pilgrimage routes) and commercially (the pilgrims that stopped at a certain locality would demonstrate their veneration by making donations and would purchase all manner of goods). Mary's milk not only symbolized the humanity of Jesus, but it was also an ancient symbol of the gift of life. The breastfeeding Mary was also used as an allegory of the Church which suckles her children, the faithful, and provides them spiritual nourishment.⁴³ Most important, however, the insistence on the human, physical aspects of Mary connected her traditional function as a mediator between humanity and Christ to her role as the mother of God: while all saints could potentially function as patron-mediators between humanity and divinity, it was Mary's role as a mother that made her the principal and most powerful mediator in people's minds. Jesus, in his human dimension, was born and raised just like all other babies, and he was dependant on the nourishment that Mary provided, first and foremost through her lactating breast. In medieval iconography, for example, Mary bares her breasts before Christ during a Last Judgment scene in a gesture of supplication, asking mercy on behalf of humanity: by showing her breast, she reminds him that she has a legitimate right to ask him for things.⁴⁴ Motherhood is the source of Mary's power.

Timoteo manipulates the power embedded in the image of Mary mother of Christ to advance his own interests as well as the institutional interests of the church. By using Mary's image in this fashion, he facilitates not only the corruption of Lucrezia's morals but also contributes to the corruption of the Madonna's *reputazione*. It is no accident that throughout the scene

⁴³ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Vintage Books: New York, 1983), 194.

⁴⁴ Yalom, *History of the Breast*, 36.

Timoteo refers to Lucrezia by the term Madonna and, thus, establishes an association in the audience's mind between her corruption and that of Mary.

The whole scene demonstrates the ways in which motherhood is perceived as a high value commodity, and how it is used in this way by the men in *Mandragola*. Sostrata's motherhood—the relationship she has with her daughter and the trust Lucrezia has in her—is used to facilitate the attainment of the men's objects of desire: a son for Nicia, sex for Calimaco, money for Timoteo, and money and satisfaction for Ligurio. Sostrata's motherhood is understood in commercial terms: it has value because it can be used to attain other valuable objects, such as sons, sex, and money. The maternal breast of Mary is also a valuable commodity, and Timoteo and the church use it to gain money and believers. But while Mary, the exemplar of the virtuous mother, is asked to intercede with Christ on behalf of her fallen children, Sostrata, who is perceived by the men as a fallen woman, is asked to intercede on behalf of the men in order to corrupt her virtuous daughter. Saint or sinner, however, the mediatrix mother is being used to advance the interests of men.

Edward Muir has argued that “relations with the sacred provide an idealized pattern of earthly social relations,”⁴⁵ but also that medieval and Renaissance Italians seem to have believed that divine precepts mirrored human practices, not the other way around.⁴⁶ Indeed, in *Mandragola* the sacred motherhood of Mary is valued in utilitarian secular terms, and the Madonna's “sacred breast” is used in the cause of corrupting a chaste woman.

⁴⁵ Edward Muir, “The Virgin on the Street Corner: The Place of the Sacred in Italian Cities,” in *Essential Readings in Renaissance History*, ed. Paula Findlen (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 153.

⁴⁶ Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta and Factions in Friuli during the Renaissance* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 69-71.

If the image of the *Madonna del latte* is exploited in this way, why shouldn't earthly mothers such as Sostrata be used in the same way? In both cases, when mothers fulfill their function as mediatrix, motherhood is a highly prized commodity.

IV. Compliant or Subversive Motherhood?

Are the mothers in *Mandragola* perpetrators of patriarchal, male interests? Mary is merely her breasts, and as such she is used to assist Fra Timoteo in his lies and immorality. Sostrata seems to perform her maternal duties according to patriarchal expectations and the needs of the men in *Mandragola*: she educates and instructs her daughter in a way that facilitates the attainment of male desire. Moreover, she instructs her daughter to be obedient and submissive, by telling her to follow her husband's and the friar's instructions without a second thought.⁴⁷

By instructing Lucrezia in this way, and by physically placing her in the bed in which she will have sex with (the disguised) Callimaco,⁴⁸ Sostrata seems to comply with another generic expectation of a mother: she is her daughter's teacher and guide. Like all mothers, she is expected to raise her daughter to function within the conventional gender role division, and in doing so she instructs her daughter in patriarchal expectations. One of those expectations is that wives will demonstrate the feminine virtue of submissiveness, obedience and passivity.

However Sostrata is in fact anything but a passive accomplice of male interests, and she has certainly not internalized patriarchal discourse. Rather,

⁴⁷ For example in III:10.

⁴⁸ See III:11 and IV:8.

Sostrata uses her roles of teacher and mediator to subvert the interests of the patriarchal institutions that construe her motherhood as a commodity and assigned her these roles in the first place. Sostrata gives Lucrezia two reasons why she should comply with her husband's uncommon request. First, she explains that having children is in Lucrezia's best interest, since "a woman without children is a woman without a home. If her husband dies, she is left like an animal, abandoned by everybody."⁴⁹ By presenting this scenario, Sostrata provides her daughter with a practical lesson, derived from the social reality of women's lives and from her own personal experience as a woman, a mother, and a widow.⁵⁰ The second reason is that there are numerous women who would have been grateful to have the same opportunity as Lucrezia and be allowed by their own husbands and priests to experience extramarital sex.

We must note that this mother-daughter scene takes place in church, in the presence of Fra Timoteo who has just sworn on the Madonna's sacred breast that it is morally and spiritually permissible for Lucrezia to have sex with a man other than her husband. He tells her that it is not the body that sins, but the will: since she does not wish to betray her husband, since she will gain no pleasure from this act, and since her husband will benefit from it and receive a

⁴⁹ *The Comedies*, 225. *Mandragola*, 3:11: "una donna, che non ha figliuoli, non ha casa. Muorsi el marito, resta come una bestia, abandonata da ognuno."

⁵⁰ Mansfield reads *Mandragola* as the failing of Christianity to operate well in the world of practice. Both Nicia and Lucrezia demonstrate how the language of morality is replaced with the rhetoric of practicality; see Harvey C. Mansfield, "The Cuckold in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*," in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli*, ed. Sullivan, 1-29. Note also that to describe the fate of a widow without a home, Sostrata uses the same term—*bestia*—that Timoteo used earlier (in III:9) to describe her. By choosing a term that men clearly employ to describe (and to diminish) certain women, Sostrata illustrates her point in a credible manner.

son, her sin will not be more severe than if she were to eat meat when she should have fasted. Hence, while Fra Timoteo presents Lucrezia's displeasure at the prospect of the sexual act as a strong incentive to actually do it, Sostrata presents the prospect of Lucrezia's pleasure as a strong incentive to do it.

Lucrezia's confessor attempts to convince her with arguments about morality: he keeps assuring her that there is nothing immoral about what she is about to do. Indeed, he assures her that complying with her husband's wishes is positively moral, since in this way she will submit to his will and fill another seat in heaven.⁵¹ By contrast, when advising her daughter to go along with the men's plan, Sostrata does not emphasize moral or spiritual issues, but rather the realities of women's lives. She supports the same course of action that the men do, but for a completely different end: by sleeping with a stranger and providing her husband with a son, Lucrezia will have gained an insurance policy for the future life-stage of widowhood and will also gain a pleasurable experience that married women are generally denied.

The mother indeed assumes her conventional role as a guide and complies with the men's request that she convince her daughter to do as they ask. More than that, she tells the friar that, if Lucrezia does not relent, she will

⁵¹ Timoteo tells Lucrezia that if the action (of sleeping with another man) results in a child (and hence another Christian soul) then she should not worry about its morality. He literally tells her that the final end must be considered in all matters: "el fine si ha a riguardare in tutte le cose" (III:11). This language echoes chapter 18 of *The Prince* where Machiavelli says that all people, and especially princes, must consider the final end at all times, and that if the prince's actions result in winning and maintaining the state, then everyone will praise the actions he undertook to achieve it: "e nelle azioni di tutti li uomini, e massime de' principi, dove non è iudizio da reclamare, si guarda al fine. Facci dunque uno principe di vincere e mantenere lo stato: e' mezzi saranno sempre iudicati onorevoli, e da ciascuno laudati."

practically force her daughter to get into the bed herself. Both mother and daughter operate within a patriarchal framework, which seems to influence the nature of their relationship. In contrast to the friar, however, Sostrata does not instruct her daughter on issues of morality and virtue. Rather, she gives her a lesson in attaining her own objectives in spite of the patriarchal agenda of containing and disciplining the female. In fact, Lucrezia surrenders to Nicia's request only after Sostrata explains these practical benefits. Her husband's pleadings and Fra Timoteo's moral, logical, and universal⁵² arguments do not suffice.

Ligurio and Nicia acknowledge that, if they do not succeed in convincing Lucrezia, then her mother will. And indeed, where the ties of marriage and religion fail, motherhood succeeds.⁵³ Or, to put it differently, where the fathers fail, the mother succeeds, since Timoteo and Nicia are in a sense also Lucrezia's fathers.⁵⁴ It is no surprise, then, that Nicia feels as if

⁵² *The Comedies*, 222-23: "As far as conscience is concerned, one must make the following generalization: where there is a certain good and an uncertain evil, one must never abandon that good for fear of the evil." The Italian reads: "Voi avete, quanto alla coscienza, a pigliare questa generalità, che, dove è un bene certo ed un male incerto, non si debbe mai lasciare quel bene per paura di quel male" (III:11).

⁵³ See also Nicia's description in IV:8: "If her mother hadn't told her to get her ass moving, she never would have gotten into that damned bed." *The Comedies*, 249. The original says, "le disse el padre del porro," which literally means to tell someone the father of the leek. This idiom is used in the sense of rebuking someone and warning him of the consequences if he doesn't change. See Allan Gilbert (trans.), *Machiavelli the Chief Works and Others*, Vol. II (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), 811, note 1.

⁵⁴ As her priest and confessor, Timoteo is Lucrezia's spiritual father and they express this relationship by using the terms *padre* and *figliuola mia* with one another. Nicia, as the older husband and the head of the household, is a *paterfamilias* in the social and political reality of Renaissance patriarchy. See also Eva Cantarella's discussion of the status of *loco filiae* that wives had in relation to their husbands, in her "Homicides of Honor: The Development of Italian Adultery Law over Two Millennia," in *The Family in Italy from Antiquity*

Lucrezia, who was almost half dead the night before, is now reborn.⁵⁵ Lucrezia agrees to the plan, sleeps with Callimaco, and keeps him as a lover because of her mother's practical arguments. Sostrata is twice the mother: after giving birth to Lucrezia the first time, she now enables the rebirth of the Lucrezia that we encounter at the end of the play. It is the mother Sostrata who enables the central act of the play – the lovemaking of Callimaco and Lucrezia, the cuckolding of Nicia, and Lucrezia's transformation.

VIII. The Case of Lucrezia's virtù

What, then, is the nature of the relationship between gender, motherhood, and *virtù* in *Mandragola*? I have shown the ways in which Sostrata exhibits the attributes with which Machiavelli constructs his virtuous prince: she knows how to fight fortune by being astute, by recognizing the danger to come, and by preparing the necessary weapons ahead of time. Even her sexuality is an aspect of her *virtù*, since Machiavelli's prince does not merely outwit fortune, but sets out to possess her sexually.

Sostrata, however, is not the only one who displays aspects of *virtù*. Ferroni argues that Lucrezia is the perfect model of political behavior; she is the sage who is active and adaptive in the face of fortune; she is the one who truly possesses *virtù* in *Mandragola*.⁵⁶ In fact, it seems that by the end of the play Lucrezia emerges as the only ruler in *Mandragola*'s community: after her

to the Present, eds. Davis I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 229-44.

⁵⁵ He tells Lucrezia that she should go to church to receive a blessing because it is as if she was reborn this morning: "come se tu [Lucrezia] rinascessi." *Mandragola*, V:5.

⁵⁶ Giulio Ferroni, "'Transformation' and 'Adaptation' in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. Ascoli and Kahn, 81-116.

night with Callimaco, Ligurio loses his authority over the young man.⁵⁷

Callimaco, however, serves not his own wishes, but those of Lucrezia: he tells Ligurio they should hurry and go to the church as he promised Lucrezia.

Callimaco no longer follows Ligurio's lead, but by no means has he become autonomous. Rather, Lucrezia is the one who now calls the shots.

Lucrezia's control of Callimaco is also manifested earlier in this scene: When Ligurio asks how he enjoyed the night with Lucrezia, Callimaco reports that she succumbed completely to his sexual prowess after he made her taste the difference between lovemaking with a young man and with an old one.⁵⁸

He reports that Lucrezia said:

I therefore take you as my lord, my master and my guide. You shall act as a father and protector to me, and I will be yours completely. What my husband has willed for this one night, he shall have for good and ever.⁵⁹

io ti prendo per signore, patrone, guida: tu mio padre, tu mio difensore, e tu voglio che sia ogni mio bene; e quel che 'l mio marito ha voluto per una sera, voglio ch'egli abbia sempre. (V:4)

Lucrezia accepts Callimaco as her superior—as her master, patron, and guide—but immediately proceeds to tell her master what to do; she tells him

⁵⁷ See *Mandragola* V:4. The quotation appears on page 56.

⁵⁸ Some modern readers of *Mandragola* seem eager to accept Callimaco's report that Lucrezia couldn't resist him. Richard Andrews, however, argues against such a reading. See his illuminating close reading in *Scripts and Scenarios*, 53-4, and also in his "Anti-feminism in *commedia erudita*," in *Contexts of Renaissance Comedy*, eds. Janet Clare and Roy Eriksen (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 1997), 11-31.

⁵⁹ *The Comedies*, 269.

that he is her father, but then takes control of him and decides their next course of action.

Callimaco does not narrate Lucrezia's wishes in the third person.⁶⁰ Instead, he speaks as if providing a direct quotation of the wishes she expressed to him. At the beginning of the play, he falls in love with Lucrezia before seeing her, having heard her described by another man. In a way, he falls in love with a disembodied woman who is no more than a verbal construct to him. By the end of the play he speaks on her behalf and thus reconstructs her as a verbal entity, seeming to take possession of her voice. But the opposite interpretation holds true as well: Lucrezia speaks through Callimaco's mouth and thus takes possession of his voice. She is thus present on stage even when she is physically absent. In addition, we must note that Lucrezia is the one taking possession ("ti prendo") of Callimaco, not the other way around, and the verb *voglio* in this passage describes Lucrezia's wishes but never Callimaco's.

It seems that lovemaking with Lucrezia did not turn Callimaco into a master and a father. If at the beginning of the play Callimaco described with confidence how he would "attack" Lucrezia's chaste nature and use various means to manipulate her, by the end of the play he has no power or autonomy. When Lucrezia "receives" a body and engages in sexual intercourse with Callimaco, she demonstrates how the female body is dangerous to manly *virtù*. Machiavelli explores this anxiety about the dangers that the female body poses to *virtù* also in *L'asino* (1517), a poem which he composed more or less during the same period in which he wrote *Mandragola*.

⁶⁰ For example, he could have said something such as "she told me she wished to take me as her master."

In this poem, the narrator arrives in a strange world and learns from a beautiful, young woman that he is in Circe's kingdom. The woman is the caretaker of men who—through Circe's witchery—were turned into animals, and she offers to hide the narrator in her chambers, so that Circe will not turn him into an animal as well. The narrator hides there for several nights and is fed and bedded by his female guide.

Michael Harvey states that, although in Machiavelli's view of sexuality men of *virtù* can subdue women, in *L'asino* the narrator's masculinity—his *virtù*—shrinks before Circe, thus demonstrating men's fears about always having to prove their manliness. But, also uncommon in Machiavelli's thought, in *L'asino* the narrator regains his *virtù* by establishing a relationship of mutuality with a kind woman.⁶¹ However, a more nuanced reading of *L'asino* will reveal that it reflects Machiavelli's fear of the female and his perception that no mutuality is possible between the sexes—only a relationship between the conqueror and the conquered.

The narrator is indeed terrified of encountering Circe who embodies the dangers of female sexuality. But, unlike Harvey, I do not believe that Machiavelli here suggests a positive alternative to the relationship of male and female, not even through the character of the female guide. Indeed, because the guide is responsible for the wellbeing of the men who have been turned into animals, she appears to be a nurturing female who provides the narrator both with material sustenance and emotional nourishment, i.e., reassurances, encouragement, and protection from the evil female, Circe. In short, on the surface of things, she represents the positive image of the female-as-mother

⁶¹ Harvey, "Lost in the Wilderness," in *Comedy and Tragedy*, ed. Sullivan, 120-37.

versus the female-as-man-eater. However, as the poem continues, it becomes clear that the narrator can engage in self-reflection only when he is left alone in her chambers. His self-consciousness and his capacity for rational and analytical observation completely disappear whenever this woman is present.⁶² Moreover, after the narrator is invited into the lady's bed, and just before their sexual intercourse, there is an explicit gender reversal:

And as on the first evening, timid and bashful and wrapped in
the counterpane near her husband, the new wife lies,
so round timid me the cover of the bed was wrapped, as though
in my strength [*virtù*] I had no trust.⁶³

E come giace stanca e vergognosa
E involta nel lenzuol, la prima sera,
presso al marito la novella sposa,
così d'intorno, pauroso, m'era
la coperta del letto inviluppata,
come quel che 'n virtù sua non ispera.⁶⁴

Who is the husband and who is the wife here? Who is the possessor and who is possessed? *L'asino* does not offer the potential for mutuality, but rather underscores the ways in which Machiavelli perceives the female—whether she be mother or lover—as a threat to man's masculinity.

⁶² In chapters 5-6 of the work.

⁶³ Trans. Gilbert, p.760.

⁶⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *L'asino*, in *Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli: Scritti letterari* IV, ed. Luigi Blasucci (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1989), lines 97-102.

In *La Mandragola*, just as in *L'asino*, females are not conquered by men, but rather emasculate men. *L'asino* emphasizes that even those females who appear to be gentle and tame cannot be trusted, since the mere presence of female bodies, and the desire they stir, lead men away from *virtù* and cause them to lose their self-control. In a similar fashion, although Callimaco seems to have succeeded in his desire to possess Lucrezia, in fact his very success in possessing her body enables Lucrezia to conquer him. And, if before the lovemaking scene Nicia could order Lucrezia to do certain things,⁶⁵ by the end of the play, Lucrezia orders him around: she tells him where to go, how much money he should give the friar, and how she wishes Callimaco to be their friend.⁶⁶ Nicia perceives that during the night Lucrezia has gone through a fundamental transformation, and he describes her as a rooster (“gallo”): an image which attributes virility, masculinity, and authority to her. This transformation of Lucrezia takes place after she has supposedly submitted to her husband’s wishes, and after she has supposedly been conquered by Callimaco: the sexual act has tamed the males while turning Lucrezia into a rooster. Sexuality has empowered Lucrezia and enabled her to discover her capacity for agency.

By the end of the play Lucrezia holds power over her husband, Nicia, and her lover, Callimaco. Or, to put it differently, this mother-to-be holds power over the two fathers.⁶⁷ It is not merely the carnal act that empowers Lucrezia, but also its intended consequence, i.e., impregnating her and turning her into

⁶⁵ E.g., give a urine sample. *Mandragola*, II:2.

⁶⁶ *Mandragola*, V:5-6.

⁶⁷ As noted earlier, in Renaissance ideology and the prescriptive literature dealing with the domestic space, the head of the household is perceived as a father. As for Callimaco, Lucrezia tells him that she takes him as her father.

a mother. This is not to say that this is how things were perceived by the men: patriarchal ideology, and the learned medical discourse which grew out of it, minimized the mother's biological contribution to conception and emphasized fatherhood as the active force.⁶⁸ From that point of view, the mandrake plan was about turning Nicia into a father rather than Lucrezia into a mother. Nevertheless, Callimaco's sexual desire, as well as Nicia's desire for fatherhood, lead to a process that will turn Lucrezia from a potential mother⁶⁹ into a mother in actuality. And it is precisely when the potential for motherhood is actualized that Lucrezia is no longer a passive object, but an active subject with desires of her own; it is then that Lucrezia emasculates both her "fathers."

IX. A Female Virtù?

When inquiring into the ways in which *Mandragola* explores gender, motherhood, and *virtù*, one might wonder whether the women in the play can actively perform *virtù* only when the men fail in their own performance; whether the women obtain power because they truly possess *virtù*, or only because they exploit the failures of the men. These two options, however, do

⁶⁸ Katherine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 131.

⁶⁹ As all young Renaissance wives were viewed: the marriage gifts that were given to the bride were meant to increase fertility and encourage the conception of a male child. See Julius Kirshner, "Li emergenti bisogni matrimoniali in Renaissance Florence," *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 79-109. Renaissance writers who discussed the nature of women and marriage perceived women's worth, first and foremost, as their potential to become mothers. See, for example, book six of Francesco da Barberino's *Del reggimento e costumi di donna* (early fourteenth century); chapter 91 of Paolo da Certaldo's *Libro di buoni costumi* (middle of the fourteenth century); book one of Francesco Barbaro's *De re uxoria* (1415), and Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, book two (c. 1436).

not contradict, but complement, each other. The men's failures of performance provide the opportunity—and to use Machiavelli's terminology, the *occasione*. The women's ability to recognize and use this opportunity is their *virtù*.

We might also wonder whether in the world of *Mandragola* the type of power and the capacities that Lucrezia possesses are equated with civic *virtù*, i.e., with the ability to rule well: can this mother-to-be perform as a *gallo* and rule the hencoop? In I:3, Machiavelli's perceptive character, Ligurio, describes Lucrezia as having the ability to govern a kingdom (“atta a governare un regno”). Moreover, if we accept Pitkin's analysis of Machiavelli's conceptualization of the ideal founder of a new polity,⁷⁰ then Lucrezia appears to possess the main attributes of such a ruler: she is a founder with a mythic origin who is also a foundling.

Lucrezia is the founder of a new (domestic) community because, first, it is assumed that she will give birth to children and, thus, transform the nature of Nicia's household. Second, Lucrezia is clearly the one who decides on the future character of the new domestic community: she manipulates Nicia into giving Callimaco and Ligurio a key to the house, so that they can come and go as they wish. The mythical nature of Machiavelli's founder is indicated by Lucrezia's name. The story of Roman Lucretia was one of the most popular myths during the Renaissance, and the audience and readers of *Mandragola* undoubtedly connected Machiavelli's character with the famous Roman Lucretia.⁷¹ Lucrezia is also a foundling because, although she has a mother,

⁷⁰ Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman*, 52-79.

⁷¹ Ian Donaldson discusses Machiavelli's treatment of the myth in *Mandragola*, and he claims that the play is a satire on the Roman myth: for Machiavelli, according to Donaldson, there is no such thing as rape, because women will always enjoy the sexual intercourse. See Ian Donaldson's fifth chapter in *The Rapes of Lucrezia: A Myth and Its Transformations* (Oxford:

we hear nothing of her father.⁷² Moreover, as Machiavelli makes clear in the *Discorsi*, the ruler has to seem devout and to have a special relationship with

Clarendon Press, 1982). For the ways in which the myth of Lucretia was used in Florentine history, see also Melissa M. Matthes, *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics*, 81-95. Stephanie Jed examines the ways in which the various narratives of the Roman Lucretia relate to questions of legality and law. Machiavelli's founder is—among other things—a law giver. See her *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). Ronald L. Martinez discusses how Machiavelli's comedies follow the Horatian notion that comedies may sometimes exemplify tragic eloquence and how *Mandragola* parodies Livy's account of Lucretia's suicide. In addition to the reference in note 7 above, see also Martinez's "Tragic Machiavelli," in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli*, ed. Sullivan, 102-19.

⁷² There were several cultural notions in Renaissance Italy that led to the idea that children belonged primarily to their fathers. From a bio-natural perspective, according to the Aristotelian-inspired medical theory of the period, it was believed that the male determines the form of the baby and the mother merely provides the material. See Park, *Secrets of Women*, 141-43. Children were also construed as belonging to their fathers because, as several modern scholars of the Renaissance have noted, the mother was not really perceived as part of her husband's family. People were conscious of the fact that if the husband predeceased his wife (as often happened since men married much later in life than women did) the mother might desert her children and remarry. See Klapisch-Zuber, "The Cruel Mother." For the ways in which patriarchal ideology turns children into their fathers' creation, see Carol Delaney, "The Virgin Birth Debate," *Man* 21 (1986), 494-513 (495); for the way in which theories of procreation shaped attitudes towards familial relationships, see Jane Fair Bestor, "Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship," in *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, 150-67. Louis Haas notes that when Renaissance fathers recorded the birth of a child in their *ricordanze*, it was very rare for them to write that a child was born both to the father and his wife. A father most often described the event as if the child was born to him alone. See Louis Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children: Childbirth and Early Childhood in Florence, 1300-1600* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 18-19. Valeria Finucci notes that in Roman and Italian law the status of a *legitima cognatio* that fathers had in relation to their offspring implied that children were perceived as belonging more to their fathers than to their mothers because the child-parent tie was more than merely biological: the definition of legitimate paternity, in contrast to maternity, did not depend on the biological nature of the bond, but could also be achieved through adoption. See Valeria Finucci,

the divine.⁷³ Lucrezia clearly displays religious devotion: all the male characters comment on that, and Nicia even complains that his wife prays too much.⁷⁴

But Machiavelli's virtuous, ideal ruler has one more essential attribute—a passion, a desire, a libido. Harvey Mansfield defines Machiavelli's *virtù* as the desire to conquer and to acquire.⁷⁵ Hexter argues that Machiavelli's virtuous prince exploits *lo stato* to get whatever he wants.⁷⁶ In other words, having *virtù* implies having the drive to acquire and to possess the object of one's desire. Until the 1560s, Italian Renaissance erudite comedy staged the various conflicting desires that exist in the space of the everyday.⁷⁷ In *Mandragola* the desires of the central male characters are clearly displayed: Callimaco desires Lucrezia, Ligurio's desire is to choreograph the attainment of that desire, and Nicia's desire is to become a father. On the surface of things, it seems that they each attain their object of desire. But their desires are, in fact, subverted: by having sex with Lucrezia, Callimaco does not conquer her, but paradoxically loses his manhood and becomes possessed by her. Hence, Ligurio's desire is subverted as well, since in choreographing the seduction of Lucrezia he enables, in actuality, the emasculation of Callimaco.

The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

⁷³ *The Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, Book I: 11-12.

⁷⁴ II:6.

⁷⁵ Harvey Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 23-24.

⁷⁶ J. H. Hexter, *The Vision of Politics On the Eve of the Reformation: More, Machiavelli, and Seyssel* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 150-72.

⁷⁷ Andrews discusses how in the second half of sixteenth century the development of a formal Italian literary theory as well as the Counter Reformation influenced the content, tenor, and language of erudite comedies and Italian Renaissance theatre as a whole. See his *Scripts and Scenarios*, 204-25, 237-44.

And, finally, Nicia will get a child, but the child whom Nicia will raise and turn into his heir is the biological child of the man who cuckolds him.

Not everyone's desire is subverted, however: Lucrezia's mother is depicted as a sexual, immoderate woman, but we must keep in mind that this is the men's depiction of her. In fact, we hear Sostrata herself expressing only the desire that Lucrezia do whatever it takes to become a mother, so that she will be taken care of in her old age. She also wants Lucrezia to enjoy the one-time anonymous sexual act. Whether or not her desires are compatible with conventional morals, in contrast to the men, Sostrata's desires are not about herself, but about the wellbeing of her offspring: she functions as a caring mother. And, again in contrast to the men, her desires are attained without being subverted: Lucrezia does indeed experience sex outside her marriage, and as a consequence she will get pregnant and become a mother.⁷⁸

Lucrezia's desires are also not subverted. In fact, we should note that we know nothing of her desires until the very end of the play. We do not know if she even desires children: Sostrata tells her that she should have children, and Nicia tells the other characters that his wife desires children,⁷⁹ but nowhere does Lucrezia herself express this desire. If anything, she notes to her mother how the desire for a child can be dangerous and refers to Nicia's desire for fatherhood as a dangerous obsession.⁸⁰ We also do not know if Lucrezia indeed finds Callimaco desirable: it is Callimaco, and not Lucrezia,

⁷⁸ The conventions of the genre do not allow uncertainty about that. See also Finucci's claim that in *Mandragola* Lucrezia is represented in one capacity only: that of a mother. See Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 108.

⁷⁹ For example, in II:5.

⁸⁰ In III:10.

who tells Ligurio that after experiencing his lovemaking technique, Lucrezia now desires him sexually.

Only twice, and in the very last scenes, do we supposedly hear something of Lucrezia's desires: first, through the direct quotation in Callimaco's voice,⁸¹ and second, in the last scene of the play, when she tells Nicia that she wants Callimaco to be their "friend."⁸² However, there is no reason to assume that Lucrezia expresses her true desires to Nicia and Callimaco, the two impotent "fathers" she has emasculated. The desire she expresses to Callimaco should be at least suspect, and the one she expresses to Nicia is a fraud: obviously, it is not friendship that Lucrezia wants from Callimaco. In fact, she tells Nicia that she wants Callimaco to be made their *compare*, the godparent of their child. Lucrezia's request to accept Callimaco as a co-parent is more than merely ironic. She uses this important religious and social institution for her own needs and, thus, implements the lesson she received from her mother on how to manipulate the existing social system to her own ends.⁸³

In chapter 18 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises a new prince to maintain the appearance of piety, faith, integrity, humanity, and religion, even when he does not practice these virtues. Appearances are important, Machiavelli argues, because they have the power to manipulate and control people's minds. All the main characters in *Mandragola* say that they perceive Lucrezia as a woman who practices these virtues, especially religiosity (after

⁸¹ V:4.

⁸² In V:6.

⁸³ See Louis Haas, "Il mio buono compare: Choosing Godparents and the Uses of Baptismal Kinship in Renaissance Florence," *Journal of Social History* 29:2 (Winter, 1995), 341-56.

spending the night with Lucrezia, Callimaco presumably changes his view on this matter, though he does not say so on stage). But, as Machiavelli tells his prince, few really perceive what one is while many are deceived by what one seems to be. Lucrezia is the only character in *Mandragola* about whose desires we know nothing, while the desires of everyone else have been revealed to her.

X. The Fecundity, Power, and Virtù of Motherhood

I began this chapter by inquiring into the worth of mothers in *Mandragola*, and I conclude by underscoring the unworthiness of fathers. There are, in fact, no patriarchs in *Mandragola*: Nicia desires to become a father, but he has no biological children. Moreover, both he and Callimaco fail in their performance of masculine power, authority, and duties. As Nicia noted, Lucrezia was indeed born again, but only when her mother succeeded where the men failed and gave birth to a transformed Lucrezia. By suggesting a birth without males—without fathers—*Mandragola* taps into the performance anxieties of men and their articulation in the Renaissance discourses of medicine, art, and religion. For example, Valeria Finucci examines how Renaissance medical writings on sex and generation often express men's fears of ambiguous paternity and how these texts, as a result of this anxiety, express also male fantasies of procreation that does not involve females.⁸⁴ Katherine Park describes popular Roman myths that depict births that eliminate the female principle and demonstrates how Florentines used these

⁸⁴ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 37-118.

myths to decorate their houses, wedding chests, and the *deschi da parto* that they gave their child-bearing women.⁸⁵

The title of the play and the device around which the plot revolves—the homunculus-shaped mandrake root—articulate this male anxiety. Since antiquity the mandrake was believed to possess sinister powers, but also the power to act as medicine. One such belief, as evident in the play, is that, if mixed with food, the root increases fertility. In addition, it was believed that its smell was healing, and in Christian thought it symbolized virtue, often the virtue of Mary. At the same time, as also evident in the play, the mandrake was believed to be poisonous. According to Greek myth, it grew in Circe's garden, and the Church fathers who were acquainted with this lore believed it was an aphrodisiac.⁸⁶

These two models of womanhood—Mary, the virgin mother, and Circe, the sexual woman who seduces and kills men—are both dramatized and examined in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*. The men perceive Lucrezia as a woman who embodies both of these models, because she can poison the man with whom she has intercourse but is also a virtuous wife who will soon deliver new life into the world. The model of the sexual woman is also enacted through the character of the mother Sostrata and, of course, Mary is

⁸⁵ For example, a child born out of his dead mother's body, such as Scipio Africanus or Caesar, was perceived as a lucky omen. In this kind of birth, the woman is merely an incubator, and the child and the father do not need her in order to deliver. See Park, *Secrets of Women*, 154-57.

⁸⁶ See Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (London: Burns and Oates, 1963), 223-65. Radcliff-Umstead claims that Machiavelli drew his image of the Circe-like, man-eating women also from the *Secretum secretorum*, a twelfth-century Arabic text which tells the legend of a girl who was nourished on the venom of serpents and in adulthood could poison males, especially in the sexual act. See Radcliff-Umstead, *The Birth of Modern Comedy*, 120-21.

represented through the sacred image in Timoteo's church of the *Madonna lactans*. Even more significant, perhaps, is the fact that contemporaries claimed that the mandrake screamed and cried while it was uprooted and described it as a ritual of a caesarian birth.⁸⁷ *Mandragola* thus expresses fear of the deceiving dual nature of women while alluding to a phantasmal resolution of that fear, a resolution in which women are incubators for the begetting of men by men.⁸⁸

Ultimately, *Mandragola* dramatizes a reality in which *virtù* in the sense of manliness is not an attribute of males, but is performed by the females. It is a case study of a fatherless reality: the complete corruption of the patriarchal foundations of society (i.e. *the ordini* of religion, law, and arms), the lack of masculine virility, and the absence of male authority and *virtù* create a reality in which the female-as-mother is the prime mover. To answer the question that I posed in the title of this chapter, a mother's worth in the world of *Mandragola*, the *virtù* of motherhood, is a source of power when the dominant object of desire of patriarchal masculinities is to have offspring. The *virtù* of fatherhood becomes, to use one of Machiavelli's favorite terms, even more of a *fantasia*.

⁸⁷ See Jacques Gélis, *History of Childbirth: Fertility, Pregnancy and Birth in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Rosemary Morris (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 29-31.

⁸⁸ Nicia's desire for a son therefore causes him to insist that his wife have intercourse with a stranger, randomly picked for her from the street. Without his wife's participation, he consults with another man, "Doctor" Callimaco, on how to get his wife pregnant. Lucrezia from Nicia's perspective is a vessel (an incubator) for his heir.

Chapter two: Replacing the Father—Negotiating Motherhood and the Battle for Authority in Machiavelli's *Clizia* (1525)

I. Motherhood in *Mandragola* and *Clizia*

In the previous chapter, I examined the different ways in which motherhood and *virtù* are articulated in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*. I argued that the male characters conceive of a mother's *virtù* in commercial terms, that is, motherhood has worth insofar as it can be used to acquire objects that have value within patriarchal ideology. At the same time, however, the women in *Mandragola* successfully negotiate a different role for their motherhood: Sostrata fulfills the role of the mother who instructs and educates her daughter, but not according to patriarchal values. Rather, she shows her daughter Lucrezia how to subvert patriarchal values while seeming to fulfill them, teaching her how to use male desire to achieve her own ends. The mother-to-be, Lucrezia, has fashioned her potential to become a mother as her source of power. Similar to the Madonna, Lucrezia is defined by her motherhood. Motherhood is the *virtù* that gives her worth. But it is also an active ability which confers power on its wielder. Lucrezia's motherhood is thus constructed as *virtù* in the double sense of worth and ability—two meanings of the term that one encounters in Machiavelli's other writings. Ultimately, the women in *Mandragola* negotiate their roles in a way that allows their motherhood to function while usurping patriarchal power and using it to advance their own needs, interests, and desires.

In the present chapter, I examine the construction of motherhood in *Clizia*, Machiavelli's other original play written and first performed in 1525.¹ This comedy also presents a mother on stage, Sofronia. Nicomaco's wife and Cleandro's biological mother, she is also the adoptive mother of the title character, Clizia. In this play too, the mother's way of understanding her motherhood is different from the men's. But, unlike in *Mandragola*, her performance as a mother, i.e., her manner of mothering, does more than merely enable her to usurp male power. Rather, her *de facto* power is acknowledged explicitly by the male characters themselves, and, by the end of the play, her mothering gains her the official transference of authority from her husband. By exploring the meanings and functions of motherhood in *Clizia* and by underscoring the ways in which Machiavelli presents different perceptions of motherhood in his two plays, I will begin unfolding the negotiated and often unresolved conceptualization of motherhood and masculinity in Renaissance thought.

¹ Roberto Ridolfi claims that Machiavelli offered to put on a new play for the celebration of the return from exile of Jacopo di Filippo Falconetti ("il Fornaciaio"). The performance took place on the 13th of January 1524/5 at the Falconetti villa. For the background and a description of the first performance, see Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolo Machiavelli*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 207-10. For details on the composition of *Clizia* and its relation to the gossip about Machiavelli's love affair with the singer and musician Barbara Raffacani Salutati, see also Guido Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 2. Richard Andrews notes that she probably sang the madrigals in the first performance of the comedy. See his *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 55. For more details on the first performance, see also Aldo Borlenghi, ed., *Commedie del Cinquecento*, vol. 1 (Milan: Rizzoli, 1959), 23-24. The first printed edition of *Clizia* appeared in 1537, and Andrews counts five editions by 1630.

In what follows, I provide an outline of the play and explore the ways in which motherhood is constructed in *Clizia*. Along the way, it will become clear how maternity within the play not only upsets the expectations of patriarchy but also inverts its authority structure.

II. The Plot

Sofronia and Nicomaco raise Clizia, a girl from Naples, who twelve years before the events of the play was taken as a spoil of war by a French nobleman who accompanied King Charles during his 1494 Italian campaign. This nobleman, Bertram, left Clizia, who was five years old at the time, in the care of Nicomaco and Sofronia, who raised their biological son, Cleandro, alongside their adopted daughter. As the years go by and Clizia matures, the son and his father become rivals: Cleandro has fallen in love with Clizia and is willing to do anything to possess her sexually. His father also desires Clizia sexually. And, according to Cleandro's depiction, since Nicomaco thinks having sex with Clizia before she is married would be a wicked and ugly thing ("impia e brutta"), he decides to marry her off to his house-servant, Pirro. They have agreed that Pirro will receive a generous dowry for this marriage, while Nicomaco will get to have sex with the newlywed Clizia.²

Cleandro's use of these two adjectives—"impia" and "brutta"—situates Nicomaco's desire within the context of at least two sets of moral viewpoints: first, intercourse with Clizia, an unmarried, innocent, and pure virgin is described as impious, i.e., a religiously immoral act, a sin. It is significant to note, though, that it is not Nicomaco who thus describes himself, but the son

² *Clizia*, I:1.

who perceives his father's inner thoughts in this way. Hence, it is difficult to ascertain if this is indeed Nicomaco's own sense of morality, Cleandro's misconception of his father's morality, or simply Cleandro's own sense of morality projected upon his father.

What is certain, however, is that it is not the act of adultery or the intercourse between a surrogate father and his daughter which is morally offensive. Neither, as one might expect, does the moral dilemma lie in having intercourse with a married woman, an act which will make her an adulteress. Rather, the moral issue arises from the idea of intercourse with Clizia *before* she becomes a married woman because this would lower her value in the marriage market—a point highlighted by Cleandro's use of the second term, *brutta*. Unlike *impia*, *brutta* is entirely secular and worldly: in the social context of the marriage market, having sex with Clizia before she is married would be an affront, an ugly and aggressive act towards the girl herself, since, as “damaged goods,” her chances of a good marriage will be much reduced.

Whether or not Cleandro's description of his father's moral viewpoint is accurate, Cleandro and his mother, Sofronia, are aware of the true motives behind his plan. They set out to frustrate it, first, by attempting to marry Clizia to a servant of Sofronia's choice, Eustachio. When this fails, they disguise another servant, Siro, in women's clothes so that he will be mistaken for Clizia and stand in for her in the wedding ceremony.³ This ploy succeeds to such a degree that Nicomaco attempts to have sex with Siro, mistaking him for Clizia

³ On cross dressing on the Renaissance stage and the ways in which it problematized gender, see Peter Stallybrass, “Transvestism and the ‘Body Beneath’: Speculating on the Boy Actor,” in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Susan Zimmerman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 64-83.

on the wedding night. When he discovers that he has been outwitted by his wife and that all the members of the household and his neighbors know of his humiliation, he admits defeat and relinquishes his paternal control of Clizia, Cleandro, and the household to his wife. In a *deus ex machina* twist, Clizia's father appears and confirms that she is from a respectable family, thus allowing Cleandro to marry her.

III. The Rhetorical Construction of Sofronia's Motherhood

1. What's At Stake?

We have seen that, although the mother in *Mandragola* (Sostrata) seems to cooperate with patriarchal norms and interests, in practice she subverts the traditional roles assigned to her as a mother. Hanna Pitkin argues that the mother character in *Clizia* is very different from the one in *Mandragola*: the latter is corrupt, the former is virtuous. According to Pitkin, although Sofronia uses tricks and manipulation to frustrate her husband's plans, she does so as an agent of conventional patriarchal morality and acts as "a good woman, an agent of virtue and order."⁴ But Sofronia is more complex than Pitkin's reading allows, and she is in fact more similar than not to Sostrata.

Sofronia's character is constructed on stage through several media: through the way in which she is perceived and depicted by the men, especially by her son and husband, through her dialogues with other characters, and through a monologue in which we learn her inner thoughts and desires directly from her. Her construction as a mother and a wife is multi-faceted, and she

⁴ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 119.

receives much more stage time than Sostrata does in *Mandragola*.⁵ If we were merely to accept the men's perception of Sofronia, she would indeed seem to comply with conventional, patriarchal perceptions of womanhood and motherhood. However, by being attentive to all three levels of her characterization, we see a different mother and wife emerge.

2. The Mother's *Virtù* in The Eyes of Her Son

So, what can we make of Sofronia's character? When Cleandro describes the state of events to his friend Palamede, he says that, indeed, Nicomaco has greater authority, but my mother's shrewdness ["astuzia"], along with the help of the rest of us, has kept the matter in suspense for several weeks.⁶

E benché Nicomaco sia di più autorità, nondimeno l'astuzia di mia madre, gli aiuti di noi altri, che, senza molto scopirci, gli facciamo, ha tenuta la cosa in ponte più settimane. (I:1)

In chapter 18 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli uses this very same term to characterize the ideal ruler who is "astute" enough to seem full of integrity while manipulating the minds of men.⁷ In *Clizia*, Sofronia is described as

⁵ Sostrata appears in five of the thirty-seven scenes in *Mandragola*; Sofronia appears in eight of the thirty-four scenes in *Clizia*.

⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Clizia*, in *The Comedies of Machiavelli: The Woman from Andros, The Mandrake, Clizia. Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. David Sices and James B. Atkinson (Hackett: Indianapolis, 2007), 297. Throughout this chapter, the quotations in Italian from *Clizia* are also from the bilingual edition of Sices and Atkinson. For the Italian, I provide the act and scene without the page numbers. This information should suffice for readers who wish to locate the passages in other editions of the play.

⁷ "Quanto sia laudabile in uno principe mantenere la fede e vivere con integrità e non con *astuzia*, ciascuno lo intende: nondimanco si vede per esperienza, ne' nostri tempi quelli principi avere fatto gran cose che della fede hanno tenuto poco conto, e che hanno saputo con l'*astuzia* aggirare e' cervelli

astute by her son and she also seems to act astutely both in her role as advisor to her husband and when she herself occupies the role of authority.

Since in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance one of the responsibilities of a wife was to advise her husband, in itself there is nothing unconventional in Sofronia's portrayal as astute. Michael Sheehan has examined the nature and quality of the emotional relationship between spouses and concluded that by the thirteenth century the ideals presented to a married couple included emotional bonds of love and tenderness. He goes on to demonstrate that, by looking at canon law, the records of ecclesiastical courts (when, for example, one partner asks that the other be forced to return to the marriage), confessors' guides, and marriage sermons, one can note that marital affection derived from an emphasis on mutual consent to the marriage. One of the significant outcomes of this new ideal of mutuality was assigning the wife the responsibility to advise and assist her husband. For example, in the *Summa Confessorum* of Thomas of Chobham (1216), the wife is asked to function as a *predicatrix*, a preacher, to her husband; it is her duty to use the time when she is in her husband's arms to convince him to do good and avoid evil.⁸ In other words, the ideal wife is someone astute enough to use the sexual power she has over her husband, and, in contrast to Eve, to advise and direct him towards the good. The ideal wife uses her position as an object of

delli uomini; e alla fine hanno superato quelli che si sono fondati in su la lealtà." Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 1960), 72. My emphases.

⁸ The theory of consent appears in Christian jurisprudence and legislation after being established in the twelfth century in the *Decretum Gratiani* and Peter Lombard's *Sententiarum*. See Michael M. Sheehan, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*, ed. James K. Farge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 91-92, 108-09, 264.

desire not to diminish, but rather to enhance her husband's social and spiritual standing.⁹

One way of interpreting Sofronia's desire to frustrate Nicomaco's plans is that it derives purely from her jealousy as his wife. But Sofronia's astuteness can also be viewed in a positive light: although she lacks authority, she can still be a clever advisor to her husband. For example, in II:3, she advises him to stop acting like a fool and return to his old self; she points out to him that it makes no sense to marry down Clizia to the servant Pirro; and she warns him of the effect his actions will have on the reputation of their family. Nicomaco rejects her advice and her role as his advisor. However, not unlike Machiavelli's advisor to the prince, while Sofronia lacks the authority to rule, she has real power to effect change behind the scenes.

In chapters 22 and 23 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses the role of advisors in successful governance. He claims that a wise prince can be recognized by the quality of his advisors, since only a virtuous ruler knows how to go beyond appearances, how to recognize the true nature of his men,

⁹ Brian Richardson argues that, at least until the 1530's, prose writers who discussed the topic of love and marriage (such as Castiglione, Firenzuola, Equicola, and Leone Ebreo) mostly adhered to the Neoplatonic theory of love as tending towards the spiritual, i.e., its worth lay in the friendship it entailed and the ways in which it helped an individual improve spiritually and morally. Sexual love was mostly perceived as damaging and dangerous. Even Torquato Tasso's *Il padre di famiglia*—which promotes the broad-minded view that a wife should be her husband's companion and partner—contends that passion is inappropriate within marital partnership. See Brian Richardson, "The Cinquecento: Women in Society; Love and Marriage," in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, ed. Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 214-20. On the recommended emotional relationships between spouses, see Richardson's "Amore Maritale': Advice on Love and Marriage in the Second Half of the Cinquecento," in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza (Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre, 2000), 194-208.

and how to maintain the loyalty of those who serve him. In cases where the prince is foolish and weak, the state could still be well governed if the prince has a wise advisor. However, Machiavelli warns, the advisor to such a prince will very quickly take over and rule himself (“li torrebbe lo stato”). As we noted above, Cleandro tells his friend that his mother does not have Nicomaco’s authority, i.e., the paternal authority to rule the household. He goes on to say that his mother has nonetheless recruited all the members of the household to her cause. Hence, although lacking formal authority over the household, Sofronia is in possession of the power to rule it. In other words, she had taken over the household, *lo stato*.

The first impressions we receive of Sofronia, therefore, construct her as the *de facto* ruler of the household, and she seems to embody Machiavelli’s depiction of an advisor who, in actuality, rules the polity. By clever planning, by threats and the appearance of force, and by adapting quickly to changing circumstances, Sofronia recruits the loyalty of every single member of the household—including, by the end of the play, Pirro—until finally they all cooperate in order to frustrate Nicomaco’s schemes.

Since in effect Sofronia rules the household, her *astuzia* functions not only to construct her as an advisor but also as a ruler. Catherine Zuckert argues that Sofronia’s character demonstrates that for Machiavelli women could potentially embody *virtù*: in his comedies, the prudent management of the household allows for a successful outcome for all involved, men and women alike. Moreover, women wield significant influence over the public world of appearances through their management of the real world of household relations. In fact, since in Machiavelli’s comedies women are better at managing their private emotions, Machiavelli seems to be suggesting that

they are superior to men, who know only how to experience desire, but not how to channel it to achieve the best outcome. Machiavelli's women have the potential for *virtù*, and since *virtù* has no fixed gender, it can be employed and possessed by men and women alike.¹⁰

Machiavelli's female characters, and specifically Sofronia, are female models of a ruler with *virtù*, while Machiavelli's men seem to lack *virtù*, especially as a result of misdirected desire. Is it possible, therefore, to take Sofronia's astuteness, her good household management, and her control of her own emotions as signs of her *virtù*? Cleandro's perception of his mother, however, is not necessarily positive: Cleandro does not depict his mother as someone who uses her astuteness to obtain worthy objectives, as someone who desires the benefit of the household as a whole. Rather, he claims that his mother is attempting with all her industriousness to frustrate Nicomaco's sexual designs on Clizia because she is jealous.¹¹ With that portrayal, he turns Sofronia from a mother who cares about the wellbeing of the family, and from a wife who uses her talents in order to save the household from catastrophe, into a scorned woman who is jealous and merely seeks revenge.

Cleandro presents his mother as someone who directs her passion, her libido, towards an inappropriate objective and, hence, as an un-virtuous wife and mother. Sofronia, as constructed by Cleandro, is driven by her desire to

¹⁰ Catherine Zuckert, "Fortune is a Woman – But so is Prudence: Machiavelli's *Clizia*," in *Finding a New Feminism: Rethinking the Woman Question for Liberal Democracy*, ed. Pamela Jensen (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 23-38.

¹¹ "Ma Sofronia, mia madre, che prima un pezzo dello innamoramento si era avveduta, scoperse questo agguato [Nicomaco's plan to marry Clizia to Pirro], e con ogni industria, mossa da gelosia ed invidia, attende a guastare." (I:1). *The Comedies*, 296.

satisfy her anger, not by care for the family's honor and wellbeing. Moreover, Cleandro describes a mother who cares nothing for her son's distress:

And even though my mother serves my interests, she is not doing it as a service to me, but as a disservice to her husband's interests [...] And if she thought that [I was also scheming to have Clizia] her conscience would make her let things slide, and she wouldn't trouble herself anymore. Then I would be completely done for, and I would be so disheartened that I don't think I could go on living.¹²

[...] se mia madre mi favorisce, la non fa per favorire me, ma per disfavorire la impresa del marito [...] e come la credesse questo [that Cleandro is also scheming to have Clizia] mossa dalla coscienza, lascerebbe ire l'acqua alla china e non se ne travaglierebbe piú, e io al tutto sarei spacciato, e ne piglierei tanto dispiacere, ch'io non crederrei piú vivere. (III:2)

The son constructs a woman who is neither a good mother nor a good wife, but someone who unknowingly assists her son only because she sets out to spite her husband. Moreover, he claims that Sofronia would actually stop what she is doing if she realized that her actions might help her son achieve his heart's desire.

Cleandro's description of Sofronia is significant for two reasons. First, it provides the only account of her motherhood from the vantage point of one of her children—Clizia is neither heard nor seen on stage. Second, because Cleandro is the first to describe Sofronia, and, since she appears on stage only after we learn about her from him, she is initially purely Cleandro's

¹² *The Comedies*, 329.

construction. Through his eyes, Sofronia is a scheming woman who uses her astuteness and resourcefulness to deceive her husband, not to assist her son. Cleandro portrays Sofronia as a woman who functions badly both as a wife and as a mother: as wife she goes out of her way to entrap her husband, and as mother she does not care for her son. Her *astuzia* is not *virtù*, but vice. Faulkner seems to accept Cleandro's negative perception of Sofronia and even adds greed to her list of evils: he claims that Cleandro has to face not merely his father's lust, but also his mother's ambition, since Sofronia perceives Clizia as an asset that can, and should, be used for her real value in the marriage market.¹³

3. Sofronia's Identity Formation

If Sofronia is purely a construction of her son's narrative at the beginning of the play, by the end Machiavelli does not neglect to give Sofronia a voice of her own. And it is important to note that Sofronia's very first words on stage have to do with Clizia: "I have to protect that poor girl from my son, my husband, and the servants: everyone has laid siege to her."¹⁴ Whereas Cleandro portrays Sofronia's motives as those of a jealous wife, Sofronia describes her own motives in very different terms: she talks about saving Clizia, "the poor girl," from all the men. Moreover, she does not mention jealousy nor, at least at this stage, does she express a desire to outwit and punish her husband. In fact, the first on her list of males from whom Clizia needs protecting is her son, not her husband.

¹³ Robert Faulkner, "Clizia and the Enlightenment of Private Life," in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary works*, ed. Vickie B. Sullivan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 40-41.

¹⁴ "E' mi bisogna guardare questa povera fanciulla dal figliuolo, dal marito, da' famigli: ognuno l'ha posto il campo intorno." (II:3)

Sofronia articulates a sense of duty towards Clizia, and the need to protect her from the siege her son, her husband, and the servants have laid upon Clizia's honor. In fact, since the fate of a young woman's chastity was seen primarily in terms of the honor or dishonor of her male relatives, Sofronia assumes a responsibility that should belong to her husband as the head of the household. However, she is forced to guard the honor and virginity of Clizia from all the men who surround her, including her son and husband.¹⁵ Moreover, in contrast to Cleandro's description, Sofronia does not wish to frustrate Nicomaco's plan only because she is jealous of his desire for Clizia. She tells Cleandro openly that "If I thought I was pulling her out of Nicomaco's hands just to put her in yours, I would not get involved."¹⁶

When Sofronia expresses her feelings and her motives herself, she claims she is not merely attempting to prevent her husband from having an affair with Clizia. She believes, as she tells Cleandro in III:3, that Eustachio is Clizia's best option, since he wants her for himself, i.e., he will not hand her over to another man—he will not whore her out. One might argue that there is no reason to accept Sofronia's self-portrayal as more accurate than Cleandro's description: Sofronia's description of her motives could be a form

¹⁵ For the issues of women's chastity, men's honor, and vendetta, see Trevor Dean, "Marriage and Mutilation: Vendetta in Late Medieval Italy," *Past and Present* 157 (Nov., 1997), 3-36.

¹⁶ "s'io credessi trarla delle mani di Nicomaco, e metterla nelle tua, che io non me ne impaccerei." (III:3) Francesco Bausi notes that one of the notable deviations of *Clizia* from Plautus's *Casina* is embodied in the character of Sofronia: unlike Plautus' mother character, Sofronia is not a mere accomplice of the son, but sincerely wishes to spare Clizia a humiliating marriage. See his *Machiavelli* (Rome: Salerno, 2005), 290-91. For the differences between *Casina* and *Clizia* see also Giorgio Padoan, "Il tramonto di Machiavelli," *Lettere Italiane XXXIII* (1981), 457-81; P. Trivero, "Dalla 'Casina' alla 'Clizia'," *La lingua e le lingue di Machiavelli. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi*, ed. Alessandro Pontremoli (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 2001), 197-211.

of deception, or at least self-deception. But even if her self-representation is not the absolute truth, she is no less credible than Cleandro. Her credibility as a narrator is established especially in II:4. In this scene Sofronia presents her desire to undermine Nicomaco's plan for Clizia as deriving from a serious concern for the reputation and the disastrous state into which their household has fallen. She delivers her sentiments and thoughts in a monologue, and stage convention would have us (and the audience) "eavesdropping" on her inner thoughts. The monologue form lends the impression of validity to her description: what she says in this context should at least be more credible than what she says when talking to other characters.¹⁷

In an argument that takes place one scene earlier, Sofronia tells Nicomaco they should not marry Clizia to Pirro, since

You may have spent money feeding that girl, but I put a lot of effort into bringing her up! And so, since I had my part in it, I also want to have a say in how things are going to go.¹⁸

Io ti concludo questo, Nicomaco, che tu hai speso in nutrire costei, ed io ho durato fatica in allevarla; e per questo, avendoci io parte, io voglio ancora io intendere come queste cose hanno ad andare. (II.3)

Some modern interpretations of the play¹⁹ argue that this statement portrays Sofronia as a heartless woman who views Clizia merely from a utilitarian perspective. But her statement shows substantial maternal love on Sofronia's

¹⁷ On the uses of monologues in early erudite comedy, see Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 62-63.

¹⁸ *The Comedies*, 313.

¹⁹ See, for example, Faulkner, "Clizia and the Enlightenment of Private Life," in *Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli*, ed. Sullivan, 30-56.

part. In the norms of Renaissance Italy, mothers were expected to devote much hard work to bringing up their children, especially their daughters. According to Lodovico Dolce, for example, one of the imperatives of a good wife is industriousness and an ability to take care of all domestic matters. A wife was expected to have learned these traits from her mother, who had the responsibility of instructing her daughter from infancy in the domestic duties she would face as a wife.²⁰ Hence, it seems somewhat anachronistic to understand Sofronia as treating Clizia merely as a useful object. Rather, her statement about laboring in Clizia's upbringing and education would have been understood in the Renaissance as a proper and normative form of mothering.²¹

Sofronia's own assertions do not indicate that she cares only for the girl's value, and not for the girl herself. It is Cleandro who negatively portrays Sofronia's ability, her *industria*, when he says she uses it in the service of her jealousy, and not in the service of her son. Sofronia, on the contrary, describes Nicomaco's fathering as merely providing Clizia's material sustenance, while she portrays her own mothering with a term (*allevare*) that alludes to the care and nourishment one gives to a child's psychological, spiritual, and physical needs.

²⁰ Lodovico Dolce, *Degli ammaestramenti pregiatissimi che appartengono alla educatione, e honorevole, e virtuosa vita virginale, maritale, e vedovile, libri tre* (Venice: Barezzi, 1622), 8.

²¹ In a social context in which the influence of the parents, and especially the mother, on the character and habits of a girl was of the highest importance, it was accepted that before choosing a bride one had to examine the character and social standing of her mother. See Daniela Frigo, "Dal caos all'ordine: sulla questione del 'prender moglie' nella trattatistica del sedicesimo secolo," in *Nel cerchio della luna: figure di donna in alcuni testi del xvi secolo*, ed. Marina Zancan (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1983), 57-93.

I wish to emphasize the extent to which Sofronia's representation of Nicomaco is dismissive. It is important to understand that contemporary representations of the family increasingly demanded emotional and psychological support from the father. Juliann Vitullo's examination of Alberti's *Della famiglia* shows that the mercantile society of Renaissance Florence required a reconfiguration of masculinity which emphasized the importance of men in raising their children and the importance of the emotional bond between a father and his child.²² The father was expected not only to pass on his blood and social status, but also to take an active role in his children's upbringing. So, what was previously only the domain of mothers became the shared responsibility of mothers and fathers.²³ This is the context in which Sofronia's assertion about her own investment in Clizia should be read. In addition, if we examine Sofronia's words and consider the way that she represents herself, her commitment to Clizia is even further emphasized when she goes on to tell Nicomaco that "That girl is not to be thrown away, or I will turn, not only the house, but all of Florence upside-down."²⁴

It is true that Sofronia does not mention love in relation to Clizia, and we also do not know whether she has asked Clizia about her feelings concerning her future husband. However, this does not mean that Sofronia is being cruel

²² Since men no longer achieved status through arms but, for example, through advanced literacy and the ability to do accounting, Alberti and other male pedagogues refigured masculinity so that it included *otium* and the skills of nurturing and bonding with others that were so important to an individual's social standing in Florence.

²³ Julian Vitullo, "Fashioning Fatherhood: Leon Battista Alberti's Art of Parenting," in *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 341-53.

²⁴ "Questa fanciulla non s'ha a gittar via, o io manderò sottosopra, non che la casa, Firenze." (II:3)

or uncaring towards her adopted daughter: her behavior is quite conventional within the marriage culture of the period. Anthony Molho has demonstrated that during the Renaissance the desires of the individual concerning the choice of spouse were relentlessly subordinated to the larger concerns of the family, the household, and the *consorteria*. In addition, he shows that, since a girl had to be married as soon as possible after reaching puberty, women married down slightly more than men did.²⁵ Clizia's case is especially urgent, since both the husband and the son pose a danger to her virginity, her honor, and that of the household.

4. Actions Speak Louder Than Words

It is significant that, after Nicomaco admits defeat and no longer poses a danger, and it is no longer as urgent to marry Clizia, Sofronia announces

²⁵ Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 181-348. Even if women were married later than Molho claims—the average age of marriage was 17.9—they nonetheless married at a much younger age than men did and, hence, the time frame for finding a suitable husband was shorter. On the social importance of marriage in late medieval and Renaissance Italy, see David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *The Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985 [original French edition, 1978]), 338-39; Trevor Dean and Kate Lowe, "Introduction: Issues in the History of Marriage," in *Marriage in Italy, 1300-1650*, eds. Trevor Dean and K.J.P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-24. For a discussion of the importance of a woman's marriage not only to her immediate kinsmen, but to the whole lineage, see Carol Lansing, *The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 123-24. On the medieval Christian doctrine of marriage as a guarantee of social stability, see Daniela Lombardi, "Intervention by Church and State in Marriage Disputes in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Florence," in *Crime, Society and the Law in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Trevor Dean and K.J.P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 142-56. And, for marriage as a diplomatic as well as an economic instrument, see Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., "Introduction," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xv-xxv.

that she no longer intends for her servant Eustachio to marry the girl (V:4). If Sofronia's sole concern were to spite her husband and win the contest, and if she cared nothing for Clizia herself, she could have clearly displayed her victory by proceeding with the marriage over which she and Nicomaco battled. Moreover, we might wonder whether Sofronia would have retreated from her plan to marry Clizia, and instead kept the girl at home, if, as Cleandro would have us believe, the feeling that spurs Sofronia is jealousy. Sofronia's own words (that she must protect poor Clizia from the men) construct her as a surrogate mother who, when made to choose between the welfare of her adopted daughter and the sexual desires of her enamored biological son and husband, chooses the former. While the son constructs Sofronia as an uncaring mother and jealous wife, Sofronia acts, first and foremost, as a caring mother figure for her daughter.

Sofronia testifies, however, that it is not only her sense of motherly duty towards Clizia that motivates her efforts to frustrate Nicomaco's plan. In a monologue in which she reminisces on how the household and Nicomaco used to be before he lost his head over Clizia, she also bemoans the fact that Nicomaco's dependents, including his son, have lost all respect for him and that, as a consequence, the household has deteriorated into disorder:

Seeing all this, the servants make fun of him, and his son lost all respect for him. Everyone does as he pleases, and all in all no one hesitates to do what Nicomaco can be seen doing. It has gotten so that I am afraid, if the good Lord doesn't do something about it, that this poor house is going to go rack and ruin.²⁶

²⁶ *The Comedies*, 319. Sofronia's use of the term "reverenzia" implies that more than just respect was lost in the relationship between father and son.

I servi, vedendo questo, si fanno beffe di lui, il figliuolo ha posto giù la reverenzia, ognuno fa a suo modo, ed infine niuno dubita di fare quello che vede fare a lui: in modo che io dubito, se Iddio non ci remedia, che questa povera casa non rovini. (II:4)

Sofronia's motivation to act derives not only from the danger Nicomaco poses to Clizia, but also from the disorder into which the house has fallen and the ruin towards which Nicomaco pushes them all. She uses the same adjective—*povera*—to represent both Clizia and the household in danger: she associates the reputation and the well-being of the household with that of Clizia. Once again, if we examine Sofronia's own words, her actions seem to be driven by a sense of responsibility and by interests different from what her son and husband would have us believe.

Moreover, besides her concern for order and harmony inside the house, Sofronia also worries about the public honor and reputation of the household: she worries that gossip will endanger the family's reputation. Hence, when Nicomaco suggests that the two of them consult other people about what to do with Clizia, Sofronia exclaims, "Why should we want to start advertising this foolishness of ours?"²⁷ When Nicomaco no longer functions as the head of the family should, Sofronia fills the void by caring for those issues which are typically under the jurisdiction of the patriarch.²⁸

²⁷ "vogliamo noi cominciare a bandire queste nostre pazzie?" (II:3)

²⁸ In patriarchal typology, women were portrayed as the gossips and thus as dangers to the reputation of the family. In *Clizia*, however, it is Nicomaco's carelessness which poses this danger, while Sofronia worries about the potential damage of gossip.

Sofronia also blames Nicomaco for risking their son's future. Nicomaco has promised a house to his servant Pirro in return for his assistance. When she notes that the house would have been part of Cleandro's inheritance (II:3), she gets involved in matters that were typically not a wife's concern: inheritance, property and business. Although Renaissance fathers were meant to do their best in accumulating property, and making sure that it was transferred whole to their sons, Nicomaco neglects his paternal duties for the sake of his sexual desire.

When Nicomaco ceases to function as the patriarch of the house and has stopped being a role model for his son and his servants, when he puts the honor of the house in jeopardy, and when he is a threat to both their children, Sofronia finally takes matters into her own hands. She devises plans; she schemes with the servants and with her son behind Nicomaco's back; and, eventually, she recruits to her cause all the members of the household. She undertakes responsibilities that are—at least theoretically and ideologically—within the patriarch's sphere.

However, we must note that in doing so Sofronia actually intensifies the disrespect towards Nicomaco. She complains that her husband is no longer a positive role model and has lost all authority and respect. Yet, by scheming behind his back and encouraging their son and servants to dupe him, Sofronia displays disrespect towards the head of the family and gives lessons to the household members in subversive behavior. In the monologue quoted above, she complains that Nicomaco's behavior encourages the servants to dupe him ("si fanno beffe di lui"). But, ultimately, she is the architect of the elaborate practical joke, the *beffa*, that humiliates Nicomaco beyond repair. The end

result is that Nicomaco returns to his house and to his family, but without authority or power—he is no longer *paterfamilias*.²⁹

The play ends when Sofronia frustrates Nicomaco's plan with Pirro's newly enlisted cooperation. She dresses her servant Siro as Clizia, making Nicomaco believe that Pirro has just married the girl. At night, when Nicomaco attempts to finally satisfy his desire, he discovers a strong and resistant "girl." After an exhausting night during which Nicomaco tries, and fails, to have sex with the person he believes is Clizia, he wakes up in the morning to discover Siro lying at his side and finally understands he has been tricked. Moreover, as he recounts to his neighbor, not only does he fail to penetrate "Clizia," but he almost gets penetrated himself:

I felt myself being jabbed in the rump, and I got five or six of the damnedest pokes right here under the tailbone! Half-asleep like that, I quickly reached my hand down there, and I discovered a hard, pointed object.³⁰

io mi sento stoccheggiare un fianco, e darmi qua, sotto el codrione,
cinque o sei colpi de' maladetti. Io, così fra il sonno, vi corsi subito con
la mano, e trovai una cosa soda ed acuta. (V:2)

²⁹ Faulkner too claims that *Clizia* exposes the pretensions of fathers and presents Nicomaco's claims to the status of a *paterfamilias* as ridiculous. He goes on to claim, though, that by ridiculing fathers the play presents a healthy vision of family life: an alliance of mutual utility between husband and wife where governance succeeds because members of the household cooperate. The reading I offer, however, presents what ensues between Nicomaco and Sofronia as anything but cooperation.

³⁰ *The Comedies*, 383.

Siro's attempt to sodomise Nicomaco completes his humiliation.³¹ Nicomaco is indeed so humiliated that he admits defeat and tells Sofronia that she will be “calling the shots” and governing the household from now on. By outwitting Nicomaco, Sofronia prevents Clizia's degrading marriage and unknowingly buys valuable time for the biological father, Ramondo, to appear in the last scene of the play. Clizia is discovered to come from a noble family, and Cleandro is therefore allowed to marry her.

Ramondo's appearance is a fortunate turn of events. As Clizia's biological father, he can attest to her parentage and social class and give her in marriage to Cleandro. However, there is another possible reading of these events. Throughout the play, Clizia has been moved around and transferred from one man to another. First, she was taken as a spoil of war by a French nobleman, and she was then transferred by him to Nicomaco, who tried to transfer her to his servant, Pirro, who in turn was meant to return her to the lustful hands of Nicomaco during the wedding night. And at the end of the play, Clizia is transferred by her father—the man who was absent from her life and from the stage—into the hands of Cleandro. Readings of the play which claim that Sofronia behaves towards Clizia in a purely mercantile way, seeing her only as transferable property, fail to note that Sofronia is in fact the only

³¹ Michael Rocke has demonstrated that, within the many bonds and networks that constituted Florentine society, homosexual intercourse was one more thread. Moreover he argues against the modern tendency to perceive homosexuality as a separate culture, existing alongside a dominant heterosexual culture. There was only one male culture in Florence and it included a prominent homoerotic character. Hence, homoerotic relationships reflected Florentine perceptions of life stages, social hierarchy, and gender roles. In this context, being the passive partner (i.e., being penetrated by a socially inferior boy) was highly inappropriate. See Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 87-111.

character who wishes to keep Clizia exactly where she is—at home, under her protection.

IV. The Negotiation of Authority and Virtù

We have seen how Cleandro represents his mother as a jealous wife and fears that she will abandon him to his troubles. Yet, in the end, it is Sofronia who helps Cleandro to attain his desire, who saves her adopted daughter, and who saves the honor and the reputation of the house. She is clearly a good and caring mother.³² Yet according to Renaissance patriarchal standards, Sofronia is anything but a good wife: she displays nothing but disobedience to her husband and teaches others how to disobey and dupe him as well. By saving her children she makes her husband into an impotent laughingstock.

Sofronia has in fact done more than simply make Nicomaco give up his desire for Clizia. After he discovers the humiliating trick played on him, Nicomaco tells his wife: “do whatever you want. I am ready to do anything you say.”³³ In the original Italian, Nicomaco submits to Sofronia’s *ordini*—a term that, as we noted in the previous chapter—appears prominently in Machiavelli’s political writing in relation to the founder of a polity, the one who establishes its foundations. He goes on to tell Sofronia that, with respect to Clizia, she can govern her as she wishes (“Governala come tu vuoi”). Nicomaco gives up his authority as the ruler of the household, and soon after also gives up his authority as a father when he tells Sofronia that “I will leave

³² According to the prescriptive criteria discussed above and in chapter one.

³³ *The Comedies*, 386-87. “fa’ cio che tu vuoi: io sono parato a non uscire fuori de’ tua ordini.” (V:3)

what to do with Cleandro's affairs [i.e., whom he should marry] up to you now."³⁴ Nicomaco has lost all semblance of being a *paterfamilias*: he has no authority as a father with respect to his son, and he has no authority as the head of the household. In fact, he no longer performs as a patriarch at all. His paternal impotence is underscored even further by the fact that his loss of authority originates within the context of issues related to marriage: he leaves to Sofronia all decisions regarding Clizia and the marriage of his son. By giving his wife the power and authority to make all the decisions in these issues, Nicomaco concedes that she now determines the strategic decisions that concern the relationships of the family with other households.

Faulkner claims that Sofronia's character represents a leader with *virtù*, a leader who successfully establishes a reformed, unified household.³⁵ We must ask, however, what kind of a household can be established when the father is virtually erased? Ruggiero argues that, by failing to possess Clizia, Nicomaco actually regains his *virtù* in the sense of self-control, moderation, and all the characteristics needed in order to take part in the political life of an ordered society.³⁶ But this seems implausible, since he rather cedes control to someone else. Nicomaco controls neither himself nor anyone else. He leaves the battlefield, having lost to Sofronia.

Bausi claims that Nicomaco's character is a tragic one, since his libido is that of an old man and he has no choice but to return and function as the head of the family and restore his reputation as a respectable citizen.³⁷ But the

³⁴ *The Comedies*, 389. "Io lascio avere ora a te il pensiero delle cose di Cleandro [...]." (V:3)

³⁵ Faulkner, "Clizia and the Enlightenment of Private Life," 46-47.

³⁶ Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love*, 252, note 87.

³⁷ Bausi contrasts this outcome with that of *Mandragola*, which turns bourgeois morality upside down. See Bausi, *Machiavelli*, 296-97.

“tragic” tenor of this comedy derives rather from Nicomaco’s inability to reestablish himself as a husband and a father. He gives up any semblance of control and authority, even formally acknowledging the power that Sofronia has exercised all along. By the end of the play Sofronia not only has more authority than Nicomaco (as Cleandro notes in I:1), but *all* authority lies with her. Martinez claims that Nicomaco loses his *virtù* when he loses Clizia,³⁸ but it appears that Nicomaco lost it when he began to pursue Clizia in the first place and in this way betrayed his paternal responsibility.

V. Being a Wife and Being a Mother—a Conflict?

1. The Cultural Anxiety of Masculinity

As noted in chapter one, the most dominant representation during the Renaissance of ideal motherhood was that of Mary, mother of Jesus. Yalom claims that the significance of Mary’s breasts derives from nourishing the future Christ, and hence that her significance depends “on a male more powerful than herself.”³⁹ However, we should not fail to recognize the other side of the coin, i.e., the dependence of the baby Jesus, the future Christ, God, on the nourishment that his mother provides him through her breasts. This is a divine model of male dependence on the female as mother.

Valeria Finucci has demonstrated the numerous articulations in Renaissance literature of men’s “fantasy of escape from the maternal

³⁸ Ronald L. Martinez, “Benefit of Absence: Machiavellian Valediction in Clizia,” in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, eds. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 117-44 (132).

³⁹ Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 48.

matrix.”⁴⁰ She argues that medical and popular beliefs ascribed to women the ability to engender fetuses without the active participation of men.⁴¹ The belief that women possessed this ability facilitated a culturally widespread male anxiety concerning ambiguous paternity, female autonomy, and male dependence. It also led to fantasies of male pregnancies and to theories of generation in which men might conceive other men solely with male semen.⁴²

As we noted in chapter one, Katharine Park has explored the various misogynistic expressions of this fear in Florentine male culture by demonstrating the popularity of Roman myths that depict births in which the female principle is eliminated.⁴³ The sixteenth-century physician, Girolamo Cardano, articulates this anxiety concerning male dependency and the specific misogyny it created during the Renaissance, when he writes that matricide is a lesser crime than patricide, since the father is the agent in the conception of his child, and the mother, like the earth, merely receives the seed.⁴⁴ The Venetian Giuseppe Passi (who in 1599 published a treatise on the defects of women— *I donneschi diffetti*) provides a succinct articulation of these

⁴⁰ Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 65.

⁴¹ For example, it was believed that women could conceive offspring by digesting semen, by having intercourse with animals, and by using their vivid imagination.

⁴² Finucci provides the theories of Paracelsus in the sixteenth century as one example; *Manly Masquerade*, 69-70.

⁴³ Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 154-57.

⁴⁴ Park, *Secrets of Women*, 238-39. In this context, it is worth noting again that contemporaries described the ritual of uprooting the mandrake root as if it were a caesarean birth, since it screamed and cried while it was pulled out of the earth. See Jacques Gélis, *History of Childbirth: Fertility, Pregnancy, and Birth in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Rosemary Morris (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 29-31.

sixteenth-century perceptions when he writes that “if the generation of humans could have been preserved without women, we would have been the companions of, and similar to, the immortal gods.”⁴⁵

These fantasies of complete masculine self-sufficiency and autonomy are one of the central meanings behind Machiavelli’s conception of *virtù*. Yet the ways in which patriarchal ideology constructed the roles of the perfect woman facilitated the perception that this *virtù* is continuously threatened and thus, paradoxically, justified the male anxiety about dependence on the female principle. In prescriptive literature and in visual imagery during the Renaissance, the ideal woman was constructed as a wife and a mother. However, the duties entailed in the performance of these two roles created a paradox: if a wife performed well as a mother, e.g., breast-fed her children and placed their needs and interests as her top priority, she could no longer perform as the perfect wife. The performance of motherhood in *Clizia* uncovers a dissonance between the assertions of patriarchal ideology and the reality of male fears, desires, and fantasies.⁴⁶

2. *Clizia*’s Critique of Patriarchy

Sofronia attains what was once Nicomaco’s paternal authority because she manages to function successfully within the confines of a uniquely female paradox. Women were expected to perform as good wives and good mothers, but these two gendered roles contained competing sets of demands and societal expectations. Within the context of patriarchal ideology, a woman

⁴⁵ “Se la generatione nostra potesse conservarsi senza Donne, noi saressimo compagni, e simili à i Dei immortali.” *Dello stato maritale* (Venice: I.A. Somasco, 1602), 6 (cited in Daniela Frigo, “Dal caos all’ordine,” 64).

⁴⁶ The exemplar of motherhood, Mary, demonstrates well this paradox and the fears it created: Mary became Jesus’ mother, the perfect mother, but could she also function as a good wife to her husband, Joseph?

could either be a good wife or a good mother, but it was virtually impossible to be both.

After examining many Renaissance treatises on marriage, household management and the like, Ruth Kelso concluded that there was one common assumption concerning women that underlay all the rest: the ideal woman is a wife.⁴⁷ Daniela Frigo claims that the issues of matrimony and family were central to sixteenth-century civic and moral treatises, and that the popular genre of *prendere moglie* was not merely prescriptive but reflected the practical considerations of contemporaries: the choice of a suitable wife was held to be among the most important things a man could do in order to ensure a happy and virtuous life.⁴⁸

Ideal wives were understood to be, first and foremost, mothers, or at least mothers-to-be: if a woman was to fulfill her role as a wife, she would also need to take on the role of a mother. Men married, first and foremost, not for love or companionship, but in order to have sons who would guarantee the transmission of their family's name and property. Not only was a wife's worth dependent on motherhood, but women's virtue as a whole depended on their biological capacity for reproduction. Both Kelso and Frigo emphasize that all the treatises on ideal wives they examine assume that marriage is important because women are necessary for procreation. Book three of Castiglione's *Courtier* provides one such example: during the dispute over the worth of women and the debate about whether a court lady could, and should, exhibit the same virtues as the courtier, Gaspare Pallavicino argues that women are incapable of possessing the virtues of men since they are imperfect creatures

⁴⁷ Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956).

⁴⁸ Frigo, "Dal caos all'ordine," 59-60.

and, therefore, that the birth of a woman happens by accident and in opposition to nature.⁴⁹ In response to Gaspare, Giuliano de' Medici maintains that "you cannot possibly argue that Nature does not intend to produce the women without whom the human race cannot be preserved, which is something that Nature desires above everything else."⁵⁰ Thus Giuliano, the great defender of the virtue of women, justifies the existence of women through their biological function as mothers. Nature also requires males for the continuation of the human race, but Giuliano does not claim that the existence of men is justified through their function as fathers. Ultimately, even for Giuliano, who is presented as the advocate of women and their worth, the existence of women is understood in terms of motherhood.

However, the performance of the ideal Renaissance wife competed with, or at least complicated, the performance of the ideal mother. For example, scholars have noted that from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries Italians expressed an increasing interest in, and tenderness towards, children and childhood.⁵¹ This phenomenon was accompanied by an increasing interest in proper child-rearing, and breast-feeding was a central issue in Renaissance literature on this topic. We have seen how women during the Renaissance were exposed to an abundance of imagery that

⁴⁹ This is, of course, one of Aristotle's better known claims. See, for example, *The History of Animals*: IX.1.

⁵⁰ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 219. The Italian reads: "come possiate dire che la natura non intenda produr le donne, senza le quali la specie umana conserver non si po, di che piú che d'ogni altra cosa è desiderosa essa natura." *Carmen Covito e Aldo Busi traducono Il cortegiano di Baldassar Castiglione* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1993), III: 14.

⁵¹ James Bruce Ross, "The Middle-Class Child in Urban Italy, Fourteenth to Early Sixteenth Century," in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd DeMause, (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974), 183-228.

conceived the ideal mother as a breast-feeding mother. Yalom claims that for medieval and Renaissance society the breast had a singular importance as the link between one generation and the next—that is, breast milk functioned just like the blood line. Milk was perceived as both material and spiritual nourishment, since it was believed that the mother transmitted moral character through it. Breast milk was also perceived as intellectual nourishment: Italian visual representations of children learning to read, such as in the fourteenth-century manuscript, *Panegyric of Bruzio Visconti*, depict mothers who nurse their children while they study the ABC's.⁵²

In practice, however, many, perhaps most, Italian babies of the upper classes were not breast-fed by their mothers but by wet nurses.⁵³

⁵² See Yalom, *History of the Breast*, 36-39.

⁵³ Klapisch-Zuber claims that nursing by a salaried nurse or by a house-slave became the dominant practice in Florence from the middle of the fifteenth century onwards. See Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Blood Parents and Milk Parents: Wet Nursing in Florence, 1300-1530," in her *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 131-64. James B. Ross assumes that sending babies out to nurse was the norm among the urban middle classes of Renaissance Italy; "The Middle Class Child in Renaissance Italy." Louis Haas claims not only that the high and middle echelons of society put their babies out to nurse, but also that the practice became common among the lower classes: since women from the lower classes had to work and contribute to their family's economy, sending their baby to a wet nurse functioned somewhat like a modern day-care. As evidence, Haas notes that of the 234 infants listed as being wet-nursed in the 1427 *Catasto*, about 90 percent come from below the status that Klapisch-Zuber and Herlihy defined as rich and that, moreover, the majority of petitions for reimbursement for wet-nursing came from the poorer countryside rather than from the urban wealthy. See Louis Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children: Childbirth and Early Childhood in Florence, 1300-1600* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 99. I did not examine these statistics myself. Rudolph M. Bell appears to support Haas on this issue. He writes that women from the countryside who had recently given birth would often pay a wet-nurse about one florin a month to nurse their child while charging two florins to nurse the children of richer urban families. See his *How to Do it: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians* (Chicago:

Contemporaries understood the contraceptive effect of breast-feeding, and many husbands were concerned that their wives' breast-feeding would inhibit their more primary function of providing as many offspring as possible. Florentine fathers, therefore, looked very carefully for an appropriate wet nurse for their children.⁵⁴ This is a clear case in which a woman faced competing claims, since in order to function as an ideal wife (by constantly reproducing) she could not perform as the ideal mother (by steadily breast-feeding).

Clizia dramatizes this theory-practice problem by providing an exaggerated vision of the multifarious ways in which mothering displaces wifely duty. Sofronia does not face a conflict concerning breast-feeding, but she nonetheless exemplifies well the ways in which women had to function within competing expectations. She performs as the good wife when she provides Nicomaco with a son and heir, and when she demonstrates her concern for the family's honor and reputation. Her interest in the fate of the family as a whole should not be taken for granted, since, within the patrilineal system that used the blood-ties between fathers and sons as the social and economic organizing principle, wives were not considered full-fledged members of the lineage into which they married.⁵⁵

University of Chicago Press, 1999), 133-34. Bell provides a thorough discussion of the problems involved in attempting to establish statistics for Renaissance wet-nursing; *How to Do it*, 323, note 20.

⁵⁴ Klapisch-Zuber, "Blood Parents and Milk Parents." Haas argues against Klapisch-Zuber's statement that it was the father alone who chose the *balia* and signed the contract and claims that both parents were involved. See *The Renaissance Man*, 108.

⁵⁵ Klapisch-Zuber, "Kin, Friends, and Neighbors: The Urban Territory of a Merchant Family in 1400," in *The Italian Renaissance: The Essential Readings*, ed. Paula Findlen (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 103. Klapisch-Zuber notes that one such member of the merchant class describes a mother who abandons her children during a plague and expresses his clear perception of his own mother as a temporary visitor in the house. This episode

Yet, while Sofronia's actions demonstrate a commendable sense of wifely duty, this loyalty is also what drives her to unite all the members of the household and convince them to act against the patriarch. Moreover, the duties associated with her role as a mother are those that hinder her role as a wife, since the elaborate scheming she initiates against Nicomaco and the humiliation she inflicts on him are meant to protect her adopted daughter. We have also seen how Sofronia attempts to protect her son's interests by protesting to Nicomaco that providing their servant Pirro with a house would diminish Cleandro's inheritance.

But in the situation of their household, fulfilling her maternal duties necessarily leads Sofronia to disobey, disrespect, and deceive her husband, as well as teach his dependents how to disobey and deceive him.⁵⁶ In fact, Nicomaco himself alludes to the tension that exists between Sofronia's

is quoted in *Il libro degli affari proprii di casa de Lapo di Giovanni Niccolini de' Sirigatti*, ed. Christian Bec (Paris: EHESS, 1969), 134-37. However, Elaine Rosenthal argues that, while the phenomenon of young widows leaving their children in their husbands' households in order to remarry was common, they did have a choice in the matter and sometimes chose not to do so. She shows that the wills written by Florentine men from the mid-fourteenth century until 1528 demonstrate that husbands had respectful and trusting perceptions of their wives and often chose them as the executors of their wills. See Rosenthal, "The Position of Women in Renaissance Florence: Neither Autonomy nor Subjection," in *Florence and Italy: Renaissance Studies in Honour of Nicolai Rubinstein*, ed. Peter Denley and Caroline Elam (Westfield College: University of London Press, 1988), 369-82.

⁵⁶ Even considering Nicomaco's immoral intentions, disobedience by his wife—his subordinate and dependent—would have been condemned by Renaissance patriarchal norms of conduct and morality. See Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top," in Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 124-51; Diane Owen Hughes, "Representing the Family: Portraits and Purposes in Early Modern Italy," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17 (1986), 7-38; Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 35-56; Yalom, *History of the Breast*, 39-40.

function as a wife and the way she functions as a mother when he tells her that “I had always heard about mothers being fond of their sons, but I didn’t think they went so far as to lend a hand to their dirty business.”⁵⁷ Nicomaco is practically complaining that, when made to choose between two forms of *disonestà*, his wife takes their son’s side. More than that, Nicomaco says that mothers prefer their sons to their husbands, thus underscoring even further the underlying competition between the father and the son and between Sofronia’s function as a wife and as a mother.⁵⁸

Sofronia is trapped in a paradox. As a good wife she was expected to provide children to her husband, but the reality of their household leads her to support the children against her husband. The patriarchal prism through which Renaissance gender roles were constructed presented motherhood as an expansion of wifedom. Motherhood had no merit of its own—it was valuable so long as it functioned well according to patriarchal interests. Ultimately, the ideal woman as constructed by patriarchal ideology was a wife who produces children for her husband but somehow does not become a mother in the process.

⁵⁷ *The Comedies*, 313. “Io sapevo bene che le madri volevano bene a’ figliuoli, ma non credevo che le volessino tenere le mani alle loro disonestà!” (II:3)

⁵⁸ The tensions between fathers and sons are dealt with more extensively in the following chapters.

Conclusion, Part I: The Performance of Maternal Authority

Part one of this dissertation began by inquiring into the worth, the *virtù*, of mothers in Machiavelli's comedies; it concludes by underscoring the unworthiness of fathers. There are, in fact, no virtuous fathers in either comedy. In *Clizia*, Nicomaco fails as a father to his biological son and adopted daughter. He does not function as a father in the sense of a paterfamilias and explicitly relinquishes his patriarchal authority to Sofronia. The second paternal figure, the French nobleman who asked Nicomaco and Sofronia to look after Clizia in his absence, never raised her but only took possession of her as a spoil of war. And the third paternal figure in the play, Clizia's biological father, appears only at the end after Sofronia has already saved his daughter from a degrading marriage and sexual exploitation. In *Mandragola*, Nicia believes that he will achieve his heart's desire and become a father, but the audience and the other characters know that in actuality Callimaco will be the biological father of the child. Moreover, in both plays, the female characters empty the role of paterfamilias of any effective meaning outside of the men's deluded self-perception.

Both of Machiavelli's comedies question the worth of patriarchy, but their problematization of paternal and maternal roles does not produce a unified account of gender. Whereas in *Mandragola* the father at least believes that he rules, in *Clizia* the father hands over his paternal authority outright. Whereas *Mandragola* represent patriarchy as a mere empty ideology, *Clizia* represents the consequences when this ideology is the organizing principle of society. Similarly, Machiavelli's mother characters negotiate different understandings of motherhood. The mothers in *Mandragola* replace the value

assigned to them by the men with their own perception of their worth. Their status as mothers (or potential mother, in Lucrezia's case) enables them to take over the power associated with fatherhood in patriarchal ideology. In *Clizia*, the mother does not simply wield power; she actually obtains legitimate *auctoritas* to rule the household. She replaces the *paterfamilias* and becomes the *materfamilias*.

One of the underlying working assumptions of this dissertation is that Italian Renaissance erudite comedy participated in the construction of the meanings of motherhood, and that these meanings, far from being stable and fixed, were continuously negotiated. Indeed, *Mandragola* and *Clizia* do not share a unified perception of motherhood, nor does each produce a unified perception of motherhood within the confines of its own, distinct textual world. Rather, within their respective textual spaces there exist several, differing, competing models of motherhood, and the characters negotiate their meanings. Moreover, Sostrata, Lucrezia, and Sofronia fashion their own identities in ways that underscore the contingent and cultural nature of the maternal role, as well as the sexual politics that lie at its base.

Erudite comedy problematizes Italian Renaissance discourse on gender, demonstrating the ways in which men attempted to understand and define their own identities, communities, and polities. Linda Carroll traces the sexual politics in this genre back to the political upheavals that Italian city-states faced between the second half of the fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century. She claims that, as traditionally dominant groups lost power to ultramontane states, and as they were threatened by the Turks and became dependent on mercenary armies and professional diplomats, upper-class men

were increasingly represented as submissive and impotent in art and in literature.¹

Machiavelli offers a unique vantage point from which to perceive the ways in which sixteenth-century erudite comedy problematized gender and sexual politics. *Mandragola* and *Clizia* expose anxieties of emasculation and impotence embedded in patriarchal ideology by drawing a distinction between motherhood and mothering. The plays show that patriarchal ideology constructed the roles of wife and mother in conflicting, competing ways. They critique the social system by presenting a woman, Sofronia, who is an ideal mother, but a problematic wife as a result, and by presenting another woman, Lucrezia, who will become a mother only when she also becomes a problematic wife.

Sostrata, Sofronia and Lucrezia understand their motherhood as mothering, i.e., as an activity that gives them power, authority, and agency in obtaining their objects of desire.² “Machiavelli’s mothers” do not present a homogenous image of motherhood. However, for all three women, mothering becomes a performance of agency, action, and autonomy—a performance of *virtù*. Ultimately, *Mandragola* and *Clizia* do not so much present the virtuous mother—they do not construct an ideal maternal type—as they do the act of mothering as *virtù*. In a striking contrast to fathering, Machiavelli presents

1 Linda L. Carroll, “Who’s on Top? Gender as Societal Power Configuration in Italian Renaissance Drama,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 20:4 (Winter, 1989), 531-58.

2 This might partially explain why, although religious and medical literature claimed that the ideal mother breast-feeds her children, most children of the upper classes were nevertheless given to wet nurses: breast-feeding was an act of mothering and could thus empower women.

mothering as the ability to take decisive and effective actions as well as the ability to see beyond conventions and mere appearances.

Part II

Chapter Three: Ideal Motherhood in the Prescriptive Discourse of Humanism

I. Wifhood and Motherhood—the Paradox

I concluded part one by claiming that *Mandragola* and *Clizia* uncover two main difficulties in the seamless veneer of patriarchal ideology. The first is that, because of the ways in which patriarchal ideology conceptualized the roles of wife and mother, these two central social functions of women were competing with and, at times, contradicting each other. From almost any standpoint, wifhood and motherhood were ultimately inseparable: reproduction was not only the theological justification for the institution of marriage, but the Renaissance patrilineal system of inheritance required that the central function of a wife would be the production of sons.¹ Moreover,

¹ Patricia Skinner, “‘The Light of My Eyes’: Medieval Motherhood in the Mediterranean,” *Women’s History Review* 6:3 (1997), 391-410 (392). See also Margaret L. King’s discussion of Francesco Barbaro’s perception of marriage in “Caldiera and the Barbaros on Marriage and the Family: Humanist Reflections of Venetian realities,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 6 (1976), 31-35. For a study of the agnatic system of inheritance and its effect on women’s lives and ideologies of gender, see Thomas Kuehn, *Law, Family, and Women: Toward a Legal Anthropology of Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). See also Stanley Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000). Paola Tinagli notes that both Leon Battista Alberti and Francesco Barbaro—who wrote two of the most important texts on family life during the fifteenth century—claimed that the primary duty of a man is to marry and sire offspring. Matteo Palmieri perceived the family and the institution of marriage as indispensable elements in the political and civil sphere. See Paola Tinagli, “Womanly Virtues in Quattrocento Florentine Marriage Furnishings,” *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza (Oxford: The European Humanities Research Center of the University of Oxford, 2000), 265-84.

when brides were transferred from their natal families to their husbands' families, and when they gave birth to sons and thus mingled the two bloodlines, they became essential instruments in their families' strategies. As daughters, wives, and mothers they were the conduits of the social exchanges that made up Renaissance Italy.² Even the term matrimony, *matrimonium*—literally, of the mother—suggests that the final end of marriage is motherhood.

At the same time that the dual function of women as wives and mothers was a practical necessity, it was also presented as a desirable ideal. Adrian Randolph provides an example of this prescribed ideal of womanhood according to which wifedom, motherhood, and the civic realm were inseparable: Donatello's *Dovizia*, a statue erected in the Mercato Vecchio in 1429, represented the goddess of wealth—*dovizia*—holding a cornucopia, balancing a fruit basket on her head, and presenting children-figures to the viewers. The statue was massively reproduced as terracotta statuettes for domestic use and Randolph argues that, since these statuettes were placed in the bedchambers of newlywed wives, they underscored that the main function of a wife is to provide riches in the form of children, not merely as their domestic function, but as a civic duty.³ The conceptual fusion of motherhood and wifedom is perhaps demonstrated best by the exemplum of ideal

² Stanley Chojnacki examines the importance of the wife in the patriarchal ideology of patrician politics in Renaissance Venice. See his "Patrician Women in Early Renaissance Venice," *Studies in the Renaissance* 21 (1974), 176-203. On the role of daughters in establishing social networks in Renaissance Florence, see also Heather Gregory, "Daughters, Dowries, and the Family in Fifteenth-century Florence," *Rinascimento* 27 (1987), 215-37.

³ Adrian W.B. Randolph, "Renaissance Household Goddesses: Fertility, Politics, and the Gendering of Spectatorship," in *The Material Culture of Sex, Procreation, and Marriage in Premodern Europe*, ed. Anne L. McClanan and Karen Rosoff Encarnación (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 163-89.

womanhood—Mary, the most virtuous woman of all—who was construed as both the mother and bride of Christ.⁴

Here lies an inherent paradox: for practical as well as ideological reasons, ideal womanhood required the harmonious co-existence of wifehood and motherhood, but the virtuous performance of one role was an obstacle to the performance of the other. Machiavelli's plays dramatize this paradox by suggesting that, when made to choose, women might choose motherhood over wifehood, their children—specifically, their sons—over their husbands. The awareness of this possibility was expressed by imagining motherhood as a titled role, rather than a set of actions. More specifically, husbands curbed their wives' performance of motherhood and in practice resisted the functions that the prescriptive literature of the Renaissance defined for mothers.⁵

⁴ Alba Amoia claims that after the Council of Trent in 1563 declared matrimony a sacrament, the sacramental status of wifehood reinforced even more the cult of the mother and the virgin/bride mythology. Based on an examination of the pictorial representations of Mary during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Amoia claims that, until the Council of Trent, Mary's pregnancy and her motherhood were the dominant features and constructed ideal women as those who find complete satisfaction in their roles as mothers. See Alba Amoia, *No Mothers We! Italian Women Writers and Their Revolt against Maternity* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2000), 40, 46. However, Megan Holmes's examination of the visual representation of the Madonna from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards suggests otherwise. Natural representations of the mother-child relationship, especially those in which Mary breastfeeds her son, were deemphasized while her subordination and obedience to him as his bride were emphasized. See Megan Holmes, "Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art," in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. Geraldine Johnson and Sara Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 167-95.

⁵ Giulia Calvi claims that in order to recover early modern motherhood we must do away with wives: as long as their husbands were alive, they spoke for their wives and constructed the family narrative. Only as widows did mothers have agency in representing their experience and receiving a voice. See Giulia Calvi, "'Cruel' and 'Nurturing' Mothers. The Construction of Motherhood in Tuscany (1500-1800)," *L'Homme* 17:1 (2006), 75-92.

In *Clizia* the need to choose between being a wife or a mother affects the actions of Sofronia. Her husband is aware that she takes their son's side and comments upon it, and Sofronia herself underscores how she undertook mothering Clizia not only by raising the child, but also by protecting her from Nicomaco. Nicomaco perceives her mothering as threatening his authority because of the quality of the bond between mother and child.

II. Maternal Love and Filial Obligation as a Threat to Patriarchy

From a patriarchal prism through which children belong to their fathers, the potential consequences of the mother-son bond are unwelcome. One such consequence is that the adult child might feel obliged to repay a debt of gratitude towards the woman who mothered him. Mary intercedes on behalf of the faithful by reminding her son that she breastfed him and by calling upon him to repay this debt. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, artistic representations of the Madonna and Child emphasized more and more the intimate relationship between the two: more humanized images of Mary and Jesus show the baby sitting in his mother's lap, being protected by her encircling arms, being breastfed and looked upon adoringly by her (and not merely by saints or onlookers). In short, idealized representations of the mother-child relationship showed the two as an organic unity, suggesting to viewers that women are fulfilled only through their roles as mothers.⁶

In *La balia* (1552), Luigi Tansillo, a sixteenth-century Italian poet and a member of the Accademia fiorentina, tells his reader—an assumed mother—that

Senza che di sua mano asterga, e lave

⁶ Amoia, *No Mothers We!*, 40-41.

Nodrir può figlio gentil Donna accorta,
Onde poi maggior debito se n' ave.

Di nulla figlio a Madre obbligo porta;
Come quando ella stessa sel notrica;
sebben giacque per lui più volte morta.

A prudent noble woman can breastfeed her son
without also scrubbing and washing.
That way he will owe her a greater debt.

No son feels such an obligation to his mother
As when she herself feeds him
Even if she several times nearly dies because of him.⁷

In the patriarchal culture of sixteenth-century Italy, ties of debt, gratitude, and obligation were ideally between fathers and their sons, between the patriarchs and their heirs. This was especially emphasized since, in many respects, sons were construed as their fathers' creation: their social position was established through their fathers' patrimony, through the resources—both material riches and social connections—that their fathers transmitted. In addition, sons were understood as their fathers' creation from a biological point of view: since western theories of procreation were gendered, it is not surprising that fathers were believed to be the active principle in the generation of their offspring, while mothers were believed to have a passive

⁷ The Italian text is from the bilingual edition of Luigi Tansillo, *The Nurse: A Poem*, trans. William Roscoe (Dublin: B. Dormin, 1880), 28. The translation is mine.

role. In humanist medical thought these relative roles in procreation were articulated in Aristotelian terms: the mother provided the material from which the infant was made and then functioned like an incubator by carrying him until birth. The father's semen, however, provided the form—it functioned like a mold on clay. Fathers thus had the ultimate agency in the begetting of their offspring and were ultimately perceived as their sons' creators.⁸

Aristotelian concepts influenced not only theories of procreation, but also theories of familial emotions and filial love. For example, in his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* (1254-56) Thomas Aquinas states that mothers love their children more than fathers do because, for one thing, they labor more in the generation of their children. Second, unlike fathers, they are always certain that the children are theirs. And last, mothers constantly keep their children at their side and feed them, and in this fashion they add social friendship to natural friendship. But, because it is the father who gives form to his child, whereas the mother only passively provides the matter, a son should naturally love and exhibit *caritas* towards his father and his father's kin more than to his mother and her kin (*Sent.3.29.7*).⁹

⁸ Katharine Park notes that in a Florentine statute from 1433 women are described as a sac (*sacculus*) that carries the biological semen (*semen naturale*) of their husbands so that people might be born. See Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (Zone Books: New York, 2006), 141-43. On the respective roles of men and women in procreation see also Carol Delaney, "The Virgin Birth Debate," *Man* 21 (1986), 494-513 and Annette Weiner, *Women of Value, Men of Renown* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 17.

⁹ These concepts remained strong in Renaissance Italy. The Dominican Antoninus, prior of San Marco and later the archbishop of Florence, repeated this theory of procreation and filial love in his *Summa theologica* (c. 1454). See Jane Fair Bestor, "Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship," in *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, eds. Davis I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 150-67.

The way in which a story by Pliny the Elder was revised during the Renaissance demonstrates these notions of procreation, familial love, and sociability. Pliny wrote a tale about a daughter who visits her starving mother in jail. The daughter has recently given birth to a male child, and she can therefore offer breast milk to her starving mother. However, by doing so, she deprives her son of the nourishment that was his alone. During the Renaissance the tale functioned as a representation of the virtue of charity, but the gender of the parent was reversed: it became a tale about a daughter who breastfeeds her father.¹⁰ These revisions of the original story suggest that in the social context of Renaissance Italy charity was owed to one's father more than to one's mother. Moreover, by representing Charity as a daughter who mothers—breastfeeds—her own father, the story underscores the notion that women play a praiseworthy role in society by acting as mothers. And, by turning the recipient of the charitable mothering from a mother into a father, the story emphasizes that mothering serves the interests of fathers, who are the legitimate recipients of charity.

It is important to note that at the same time that it emphasizes how patriarchy expected women to function first and foremost as mothers, this story also highlights how mothering might pose a threat in the ideological sphere: because the father survives by being breastfed, he is in debt to the maternal figure who nourishes him. For the same reasons, one's own child might also be indebted to the mother. It is therefore in the interest of patriarchy to make sure that female mothering does not produce a child-mother relationship that would threaten paternal power and authority. Calvi notes how in *I libri della famiglia* Alberti articulates a patriarchal ideology of love in which

¹⁰ Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 25.

a mother's love derives from the physical experience of motherhood, from giving birth and breastfeeding. A father's love is presented as stronger and truer since it derives from the mind, not the unstable site of the body. However, she goes on to claim that legal discourse shows that in reality the mother-child bond did not correspond to its representation in prescriptive Renaissance literature: mothers and their sons actually developed close and intimate relationships.¹¹

III. Disrupting the Mother-Son Relationship Through Wet-Nursing

If the father-child bond was perceived ideally as the most important relationship, we might expect that the interaction between mothers and sons would be limited as much as possible, as early as possible. And indeed, in the daily realities of Renaissance Italy, the first disruption of the mother-child bond came in the form of wet-nursing. Hiring a woman to nurse one's new born was a very common phenomenon. The wet-nurse was found by the father using his entire network of clients and friends. Because fathers looked for women with an abundance of fresh breast milk, the ideal nurse was one whose connection to her own infant was severed through the death of the child.¹²

Scholars disagree about the extent of hired-wetnursing in Italy and the reasons behind it, but its prevalence in the culture of the Italian Renaissance is

¹¹ Calvi, "'Cruel' and 'Nurturing' Mothers," 82, 87. For an overview of the Renaissance genre of "I libri di famiglia" see Angelo Cicchetti and Raul Mordenti, "La scrittura dei libri di famiglia," in *Letteratura Italiana*, ed. Alberto Asor Rosa, (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), 3: 1117-59 and also Angelo Cicchetti and Raul Mordenti, *I libri di famiglia in Italia 1, Filologia e storiografia letteraria* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1985).

¹² Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Blood Parents and Milk Parents: Wet Nursing in Florence, 1300-1530," *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 140-41.

undeniable.¹³ Paradoxically, when prescribing the ideal performance of motherhood, humanists constructed the perfect mother as a breastfeeding mother. We have examined the exempla posed by the *Maria Lactans* image,¹⁴ and we noted how Tansillo denounced hired breastfeeding and emphasized

¹³ Modern scholarship divides on the question of whether or not wet nursing was a traumatic experience for children. Scholars who interpret it as a negative practice include Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, James Bruce Ross, "The Middle-Class Child in Urban Italy, Fourteenth to Early Sixteenth Century", in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd deMause (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974), 183-99; Richard Trexler, "The Foundlings of Florence, 1395-1455," *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1 (1973), 159-84 and also "Infanticide in Florence: New Sources and First Results," *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1 (1973), 98-11; Diane Owen Hughes, "Domestic Ideal and Social Behavior: Evidence from Medieval Genoa," in *The Family in History*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 132; Barbara Kaye Greenleaf, *Children through the Ages: A History of Childhood* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 42-3; Charles de la Roncière, "Tuscan Notables on the Eve of the Renaissance," *A History of Private Life*, vol. 2, ed. Philippe Aries and George Duby (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 275; Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 158. Against these interpretations stand scholars such as Louis Haas who claim that Florentines greatly loved their children and invested a lot of care and money in the rituals of birth and baptism and that there is therefore no reason to assume that sending a child to a nurse was a form of child neglect. Haas also criticizes scholars who speculate about separation anxiety and psychological trauma in children who were sent to wet-nurses. He finds no writers—not even the humanists who criticized wet-nursing—who mention this. See Louis Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children: Childbirth and Early Childhood in Florence, 1300-1600* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 92-99, 120. Valerie Fildes also claims that it is anachronistic to discuss trauma: see Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 203.

¹⁴ One can argue that this image of Mary was prescriptive because, as Margaret Miles claims, the breast was presented not as an object, but as a religious symbol. The breast was shown in a nonsexual way, as only one of the breasts was visible and the other remained flat. See Margaret R. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350-1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 45-47.

that one of the greatest pleasures of maternal breastfeeding is the gratitude of one's child.

Torquato Tasso (1544-1595) contends in *Il padre di famiglia* (1580) that the sole role a mother has is to feed her children. After the nursing age, the tasks involved in raising sons and educating them should be the responsibility of the father, since mothers tend to be too soft and tender. And, in order for children to become good citizens of a city and loyal subjects of a prince, they need to be disciplined by men.¹⁵ It is clear that Tasso perceives the family as a mediator between the individual and the larger social setting he inhabits. Moreover, perhaps because he construes family life as a preparation for the *vita civile* and the *vita politica*, it is imperative for him that sons be molded for the civic realm by their fathers. Tasso therefore limits as much as possible the mother's influence on the upbringing of the children and argues for a mothering that is solely about providing physical nourishment. Thus a mother who does not breastfeed her child does not, in fact, function as a mother.

Juan Luis Vives—using the Aristotelian concepts of form and function—claims that the breasts have a natural function, and therefore it is only natural that a mother should breastfeed her own child. He underscores the natural aspect of breastfeeding by observing that other animals in nature breastfeed their offspring. Vives advocates maternal breastfeeding by referring to theories of the maternal body and conception, such as that the mother's body provides the blood from which the fetus is formed, and that after giving birth a woman's blood turns into milk. Breastmilk is therefore the healthiest substance for the child. He also asserts that maternal breastfeeding is superior to hired-

¹⁵ Torquato Tasso, "Il padre di famiglia," in *Dialoghi*, ed. Giovanni Baffetti (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998), 413.

breastfeeding on psychological and emotional grounds: a nurse will not provide the same level of love and care that the child's natural mother will.¹⁶

Vives' views on maternal breastfeeding are similar to those of earlier humanists. For example, Francesco Barbaro claimed in the second book of *De re uxoria* (1415) that it is important for the infant's health to be nourished by the same body that nourished him in the womb and from whose blood he was conceived. Barbaro also notes the debt and the gratitude that the child will express towards the mother who breastfeeds him. The bond between the breastfeeding figure and the child is so intense that it guarantees that the mother will be cared for by her children in her old age. Barbaro even recommends that she breastfeed the infants of her servants to create ties of loyalty and harmony within the household.

Breastfeeding was believed to bond a child to his mother by more than a sense of debt and obligation. Barbaro notes that the "power of the mother's food most effectively lends itself to shaping the properties of body and mind to the character of the seed."¹⁷ According to the medical knowledge of the period, breast-milk was a transmutation of the mother's menstrual blood, and Renaissance physicians, humanists, and moralists argued that blood transmitted not merely nutrients, but also the physical and moral attributes of

¹⁶ Juan Luis Vives, *De institutione feminae Christianae*, Bk. II:10 (par.131), ed. C. Fantazzi and C. Matheussen, (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 157. See Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: a Sixteenth-century Manual*, ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 269-70.

¹⁷ Francesco Barbaro, "De re uxoria," *Atti e Memorie della R. Accademia di scienze, lettere ed arti di Padova*, n.s. 32 (1915), 62-100. The English translation is taken from Francesco Barbaro, "On Wifely Duties," in *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, eds. and trans. Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 223.

the parent.¹⁸ It is thus not surprising that the vast majority of the treatises that discussed marriage, family life, and child-rearing presented breastfeeding as the most important element of mothering.

IV. The Father-Son Relationship—the Ideal?

Yet, while the cultural images of the ideal breastfeeding mother circulated in Renaissance society, the ideology of patriarchy required an unsurpassed bond between father and son. An ideal performance of motherhood could potentially compete with, and disrupt, that bond. The mothering that mothers were expected to perform would thus compete with the ideal performance of wifehood, a performance that always underscored her subordinate position. The competing expectations women had to face as wives and mothers could affect the position of the father in another way: fathers had to be concerned not only that their sons might feel a strong emotional connection to their mothers, but also that mothers would develop such a strong affection for their sons that they would value their needs above those of their husbands. Fathers and sons might thus compete for the loyalty of the woman, the husband expecting her to function primarily as a wife, and the son wanting her to function as a mother and thus to protect his interests.

¹⁸ Renaissance theories of procreation assigned mothers even greater powers in the process of conception and generation. For example, it was believed that the mother's nutrition, the time of day during which she copulates, and the thoughts she entertains in her mind can affect the fetus. For Renaissance perceptions of the relation between maternal and filial monstrosity, see Valeria Finucci, "Maternal Imagination and Monstrous Birth: Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*," in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity through Early Modern Europe*, eds. Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 41-77.

Scholars have argued that the competition between fathers and sons was a prevalent Renaissance cultural phenomenon. Whether the political ideology was articulated in patriarchal or patrician terms, in the vocabulary of a Republic or a Principate, age and experience were highly valued attributes. In the sphere of practical governance, young males were disenfranchised and competed with their elders—their literal or symbolic fathers—for the privileges of office holding.¹⁹

The tension between fathers and sons—often exacerbated by the heavy significance that patriarchal ideology invested in these ties—was reflected and addressed in humanist treatises. For example, in *Ducendane sit uxor sapienti* (1457-1459?) Bartolomeo Scala bemoans that “Though we [men, fathers] hope for solace in old age, most often we inspire hatred, and they [the

¹⁹ Florentine vocabulary distinguished between the life stages of young men: infancy (*infanzia*) referred to children under the age of seven who were not yet capable of discerning their own needs; boyhood (*puerizia*) referred to boys between the ages of seven and fourteen, adolescence (*adolescencia*) to those between fourteen and twenty-four years of age, and youth (*giovinezza*) to men of twenty-four to thirty-five years of age. In the thought of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century humanists, preachers, and the mercantile elite, adolescence was a dangerous stage: a period of identity crisis, uncontrollable sexual desires, and changeability. See Ilaria Taddei, “*Puerizia, Adolescenza and Giovinezza: Images and Conceptions of Youth in Florentine Society During the Renaissance*,” *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society 1150-1650*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2002), 15-26. For the symbolic, ideological, and practical rationale behind the limitations Venetians placed on adolescent males and the inter-generational competition it created, see Stanley Chojnacki, “Political Adulthood in Fifteenth-Century Venice,” *The American Historical Review* 91:4 (1986), 791-810. For a discussion of the ritual significance of Florentine adolescents, the social importance of the liminal phase in their rites of passage, and the ways in which they were perceived as sexual, irresponsible, and politically dangerous by their fathers, see Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 387-99, and Trexler, “Ritual in Florence: Adolescence and Salvation in the Renaissance,” in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 200-64.

sons] rejoice at our death more than they console us alive.”²⁰ In book three of Leon Battista Alberti’s *I libri della famiglia* (1433-41) the character of Giannozzo tells his listeners how in his youth he resented the fact that his elders had power and authority over him while he was bereft of any financial and personal autonomy.²¹ The authoritarian model of patriarchy placed a huge strain on the relationship between fathers and their sons, and Alberti’s *Della famiglia* as well as other Renaissance texts critiqued it both implicitly and explicitly.²²

Since the generational conflict between fathers and sons was a common cultural phenomenon,²³ it should come as no surprise that erudite comedy—one of the most popular cultural products during the Renaissance—often reflected it. In these plays, fathers strive to assert their authority while

²⁰ Bartolomeo Scala, “Whether a Wise Man Should Marry,” *Bartolomeo Scala: Essays and Dialogues*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 44-45.

²¹ John Najemy examines the ways in which Alberti criticizes patriarchy as an ideology and as a practice. See his “Giannozzo and His Elders: Alberti’s Critique of Renaissance Patriarchy,” in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William Connell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 51-78.

²² Chara Armon discusses John Najemy’s analysis of Alberti’s dialogue and compares *Della famiglia* with other fifteenth-century texts by friars and laymen. These texts offer an alternative model of the father-son relationship in which love and delight, instead of authority and discipline, are the dominant characteristics. See Chara Armon, “Fatherhood and the Language of Delight in Fifteenth-Century Italian Texts,” *Florence and Beyond: Culture, Society, and Politics in Renaissance Italy. Essays in Honour of John M. Najemy*, eds. David S. Peterson and Daniel E. Bornstein (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 213-27.

²³ The anxiety that arises from this phenomenon does not appear merely in humanist discourse. In religious (Christian) thought, infants were perceived as innocent and pure and hence as related to the sacred. Adolescents, however, were a cause of anxiety in Christian thought since they were perceived as unstable, sensual, and undisciplined. See Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages: Fifth-Fifteenth Centuries* (Notre Dame, Ind.: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 25.

their sons strive not to subjugate their wills to those of their fathers. The object of this battle of wills and wits is usually a woman, and father and son fight over whom the son will marry, or over who will obtain the young girl that both father and son desire, or who will gain the loyalty and assistance of the wife-mother. The father-son conflict is resolved when the son marries. By conventionally ending with a marriage, the genre of erudite comedy reflects the cultural notion—common during the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries—that marriage is the end result of a young man’s socialization process and the cure for the dangers of adolescence—violence, squander of one’s patrimony, and uncontrolled sexuality.²⁴ *Clizia*, for example, articulates all of the above tensions: the father and his son fight over the same young girl; each does his best to sway the wife and mother to be on his side; and the conflict ends with a marriage. *Clizia* also demonstrates—in an exaggerated way, of course, considering its genre—the danger to the authority of fathers.

V. Ideal Womanhood in the Literature of Humanism

1. The Nature of the Literature

The plays I examine in the following two chapters—Antonio Landi’s *Il commodo* and Giovan Maria Cecchi’s *La stiva*—engage the performance of womanhood and motherhood from different perspectives, but in both of them the maternal roles that Renaissance culture prescribed are asserted, negotiated, and revised. Before considering the various performances of motherhood in these plays, it is helpful to examine the ideal performances of womanhood and the roles women were expected to play in the prescriptive discourse of Humanism. King argues that to understand the experience of

²⁴ Paola Tinagli, “Womanly Virtues,” 267-68.

Renaissance mothers we must examine the prescriptive literature of the Renaissance.²⁵ Yet prescriptive literature tells us very little, if anything at all, about the ways in which women understood these texts and how, and if, women translated the instructions in these texts into models of behavior and emotional experiences. Rather, by examining a few of the more famous examples of this prescriptive literature, I wish to inquire into the cultural assumptions that informed the ways in which Renaissance men conceptualized womanhood and motherhood.²⁶

The literature that humanists produced on womanhood was mostly misogynist in nature, especially since it assimilated Greek, mostly Aristotelian, notions about women. Humanism as a cultural movement propagated the study of certain subjects to improve the intellect and character of those who studied them, and while humanists claimed they were recovering classical knowledge, they also critically evaluated and revised ancient ideologies of governance, philosophy, medicine, and art. Nonetheless, for the most part, the literature that discussed men, women, and the family accepted the Greek notion that the nature, character, and virtue of humans derive from their biological make-up. Since a woman's dominant organ was her uterus, she was defined by the supposed traits that this organ affected, the excessive traits of lust, irrationality, verbosity, and deceitfulness.²⁷

²⁵ Margaret L. King, "Mothers of the Renaissance," in *Europa e America nella storia della civiltà: Studi in onore di Aldo Stella*, ed. P. Pecorari (Treviso: Edizioni Antilia, 2003), 211-37.

²⁶ Of course, ideal behavior and attributes were prescribed through other media as well. For example, Tinagli demonstrates how the decorations on the furnishings bought by the groom and his family were meant to serve as instructive exempla to young brides and grooms and not as descriptions of common behavior. See Tinagli, "Womanly Virtues," 267-68.

²⁷ Humanism, of course, was even more influenced by the cultural assumptions of ancient Rome than those of the ancient Greeks, and Roman

The humanist authors examined here did not so much describe what they observed of married life in their own society, nor did they describe the women one could commonly expect to observe. Rather, they outlined the criteria that should direct one's decision to enter matrimonial life; they portrayed the ideal characteristics of the woman one should choose as a wife; and they instructed husbands how to run the conjugal household efficiently. Daniela Frigo notes that three assumptions underlie this prescriptive discourse: first, that it is possible to prescribe an ideal performance of womanhood; second, that woman is chaos, material, imperfect, and non-rational; third, that the intervention of men, and therefore of reason, could modify women. Women could be taught and molded to fit the masculine world view, and they could be instructed to conform to the social designs and needs of men. The literary genre of *prender moglie*, which discussed the nature of

culture was arguably patriarchal and misogynist. For a summary of the historical origins of early modern cultural assumptions concerning women, see the introduction to Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, trans. Charles Fantazzi, ix-xxviii. Monica Green claims that from the middle of the thirteenth century medical writings on women focused only on generation and reproduction, neglecting all other aspects of women's illnesses and health. And, since these texts were on generation, the discourse derived from natural philosophy, i.e., Aristotle and Christian theology, which in effect meant a misogynist outlook and language. Women were defined increasingly in relation to their reproductive functions. See Monica H. Green, "Secrets of Women," in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 733-34. Park distinguishes between the representation of female physiology in the discourse of natural philosophy and that found in medical treatises. The late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century *I segreti delle femine*, which belongs to the genre of natural philosophy, presents a repulsive picture of women: menstruation is referred to as an illness, menses are a poisonous fluid, women are sexually depraved, and they can cause damage to their male partners due to their excessive lust. The fourteenth-century Florentine *Le segrete cose delle donne*, which belongs to medical branch of women's secrets, is more positive towards women. Women are presented as merely frail and imperfect—not a danger to men, but to themselves. See Park, *Secrets of Women*, 94.

matrimony and family life, was central to the humanistic treatises of the sixteenth century, because it addressed a multitude of issues, including the nature of civic and political life, the importance of procreation and its significance for man, the justification of masculine authority and the subordination of women, and the idea of the *bene comune* and service to the prince or the republic. To take or not to take a wife, therefore, and what kind of wife one should seek, became a debate that reflected and contained aspects and issues that transcended the specific question itself.²⁸

2. The Humanist Construction of Feminine and Maternal Roles

These humanist treatises were ultimately concerned with defining ideal performances of gender roles. They asserted the societal values of their culture, which viewed the central role of a woman—defined, as we have seen, by her uterus—as that of providing offspring. The most essential attribute of the ideal wife that the humanists prescribed was that of being a mother. For example, in book three of *Della famiglia* the young speaker, Lionardo, congratulates his elder, Giannozzo, for having a wife who runs the household in a superior manner. Giannozzo thanks Lionardo and says “My wife certainly did turn into a perfect mother for my household. Partly this was the result of her particular nature and temperament, but mainly it was due to my instruction.”²⁹ Giannozzo assumes that a perfect woman could be fashioned

²⁸ Daniela Frigo, “Dal caos all’ordine: sulla questione del ‘prender moglie’ nella trattatistica del sedicesimo secolo,” in *Nel cerchio della luna: figure di donna in alcuni testi del xvi secolo*, ed. Marina Zancan (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1983), 57-93.

²⁹ Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence: Book Three*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1994), 78. “Fu certo la mia e per suo ingegno e costumi, ma molto piú per miei ammonimenti ottima madre di famiglia.” Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, ed. Ruggiero Romano, Alberto Tenenti and Francesco Furlan (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), 234.

through the discipline and guidance that men provide. More significant, however, is the way in which Giannozzo articulates the worthiness of his wife by referring to her as the mother of his household. In fact, for the remainder of book three, the term “wife” (*moglie*) is used by both men interchangeably with the term “mother of the family” (*madre di famiglia*).³⁰ This usage not only underscores the centrality of motherhood in the identity of a wife, but also suggests that in the cultural taxonomy of the Renaissance these two gender roles were synonymous categories. Francesco Barbaro claims that the virtue of the wife is important since she greatly influences the “quality” of the offspring, the nobility of the patrilineal family, and the quality of the future rulers of the state.³¹ In his view too, the primary function of a wife is to become a mother.

The ideal woman was a wife who was a mother, and anatomical drawings and medical treatises used the uterus to represent and define women. In this way, as Park claims, women were defined in terms of their usefulness and the ways in which they—their bodies—exist for others: for lineage, city, and state. The heart was the organ that defined men, standing for the self and ascribing selfhood to men.³² In other words, men’s identity was

³⁰ See, for example, *I libri della famiglia*, 245, 246, 250, 251, 254.

³¹ Margaret L. King, *Humanism, Venice, and Women: Essays on the Italian Renaissance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 31-35.

³² Park, *Secrets of Women*, 264. See also her insightful reading of the title page of Andreas Vesalius’s *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543). It represents a frontal view of a reclining woman and Vesalius dissecting her uterus. Park claims that in the sixteenth century scientific inquiry was gradually understood in gendered terms: the observer construed as male and the object as female. From Vesalius’s work, we see that agency and subjectivity were reserved to the anatomist and his male audience, while the woman’s body was a source of information. This use of the female body deprives her of subjectivity and also sexualizes vision itself. See *Secrets of Women*, 249-55.

represented as a construct of self-reflexive consciousness, while women's identity was a product of the functions it served.

The discourse of Humanism prescribed ideal women as mothers who not only nourished their offspring but also kept them—daughters and sons—by their side until the age of seven.³³ In addition, ideal mothers not only provided physical nourishment but also gave their young offspring the first lessons in the acquisition of language,³⁴ guided them in moral conduct by telling them stories of saints and other religious stories, and instructed daughters in the responsibilities they would be expected to fulfill as future wives and mothers. More important, though, moralists and humanists underscored the power mothers have when they are the main caretakers of their children.³⁵ For example, Vives asserted that

³³ Haas says that, while some historians claim that there was a clear division of labor regarding child rearing, i.e., that mothers alone reared children until the age of seven when this responsibility passed to the father, fathers were in fact expected to, and in practice did, take part in the education and rearing of their children even before the age of seven. Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, 94.

³⁴ Danièle Alexandre-Bidon examines how mothers were responsible for their children's proficiency in the vernacular and argues that learning a vernacular language was perceived as a completely oral affair: the child received a reward in the form of milk or honey. See Danièle Alexandre-Bidon, "La lettre volée: apprendre à lire à l'enfant au Moyen-Âge," *Annales ESC* 4 (July-August, 1989), 988. According to Gary Cestaro, in the collective imagination of the Renaissance learning the vernacular was associated with milk, nourishment, breastfeeding, and the maternal body. Latin, however, was associated with discipline, order, masculinity, and male authority. See Gary P. Cestaro, *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003). For a similar perspective, see Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages*, 55. The authors examine the vita of Guibert of Nogent in which he tells how his mother was distressed at the corporal punishment that his teacher inflicted and decided that he would not study Latin any longer because she didn't want this cruelty inflicted on him.

³⁵ According to Didier Lett, the strong, intimate relationship between the caretaker mother and her child was frequently expressed in medieval

In its [the child's] first sense perceptions and first information of the mind it takes from what it hears or sees from the mother. Therefore, much more depends on the mother in the formation of the children's character than one would think. She can make them either very good or very bad.³⁶

Mothers were expected to be role models for their daughters and exhibit the attributes deemed desirable in a woman. Indeed, the ways in which women functioned as pedagogical models received numerous literary expressions during the Renaissance. From the fifteenth century onwards, certain female figures were used as manifestations of the kinds of virtues desirable in a woman. These female models of imitation no longer appeared only in catalogues of famous women, but were introduced into other genres as well: for example, they were used in support of the pro-feminist side in the genre of the *querelle des femmes*. In the humanist treatises of the sixteenth century, such as Vives's and Dolce's works, exemplary women become the foundation on which the entire female ethical system was erected. Literary females and

hagiography and other types of saints' stories: when a child is lost or in dire distress, the mother is more likely than the father to be the first one to find and save the child by initiating the intercession of the saint (when the child in the story is past the age of eight, the father is more likely to take that role). See Didier Lett, *L'enfant des miracles: enfance et société au Moyen Age, XIIe-XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1997), 165-78. On the same issue, see Ronald C. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1997) and also Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries," in *Medieval Families: Perspectives on Marriage, Household, and Children*, ed. Carol Neel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 20-124.

³⁶ Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, trans. Fantazzi, 270. (*De institutione*, II:10, par.132).

real mothers were construed as exempla and became an essential part of the educational program of young girls.³⁷

The prescribed cultural image of ideal womanhood consisted of a long list of qualities. The prevalent qualities were obedience to male authority (mainly fathers and husbands),³⁸ chastity,³⁹ silence,⁴⁰ loyalty and endurance,⁴¹ modesty in dress and comportment,⁴² and the ability to carry out

³⁷ Marta Ajmar, "Exemplary Women in Renaissance Italy: Ambivalent Models of Behaviour?," in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Panizza, 244-63.

³⁸ See for example book three in Alberti's *Della famiglia* (especially p.81) in *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, trans. Watkins. Barbaro claims that obedience is the most important quality in a wife; *De re uxoria*, II:1 (p. 193 in *The Earthly Republic*, ed. Kohl and Witt).

³⁹ For example, the humanist Matteo Palmieri claims in *Libro della vita civile* (c. 1438) that "The woman's greatest and absolute care must be both to refrain from copulating with another man, and to avoid the suspicion of such a repulsive wickedness. This error is the supreme betrayal of decency [...]. The woman no longer deserves to be called married [...]." Quoted in Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli (eds.), *Women in Italy, 1350-1650: Ideals and Realities. A Sourcebook* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 143. In the second book of Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della institutione delle donne* (Venice, 1545), he presents chastity as the first of the two most important virtues of a wife (the second being love).

⁴⁰ Vives relates speech and silence to authority. Therefore, while he recommends that, in their roles as mothers, women instruct their children in religion and moral behavior, he advocates that all women keep silent in the public sphere, especially in matters of the soul and the mind. See Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 72.

⁴¹ For a survey and an analysis of the ways in which Renaissance perceptions of womanhood were influenced by the models of heroines found in classical myths and history, such as Lucretia and Antigone see Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe*, vol. 1, 1500-1800 (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 43-45. She also argues that the female models that appeared in satire and comedy underscore the distance between the theory and the practice of family life, while reaffirming the desirability of the patriarchal order (48). The reading I offer of Landi's and Cecchi's comedies suggests that the desirability of the patriarchal order is questioned.

⁴² Barbaro prescribes a perfect wife who is not merely modest in her dress, but also in her comportment. In fact, he constructs a perfect wife by

the daily chores of the household.⁴³ Some writers set the standard even higher and required the ideal wife to perform as a mediator on several interpersonal levels: she was to function as a conduit of harmony and peace in the familial sphere and bridge differences between the various family members; she was to eliminate conflicts among the servants and between servants and family members; and, like the perfect model she was constantly asked to emulate—Mary—she was to function as a perfect mother by interceding on behalf of those in need. Because of her role as a mother, Mary could intercede on behalf of the faithful before her son. Because of their roles as mothers,

disciplining every aspect of her body, and the purpose behind the instructions he gives is to make the wife as inconspicuous as humanely possible. Barbaro's perfect wife seems to fade into the background almost completely: "I therefore would like wives to evidence modesty at all times and in all places. They can do this if they will preserve an evenness and restraint in the movements of the eyes, in their walking, and in the movement of their bodies [...]. I earnestly beg that wives observe the precept of avoiding immoderate laughter." See *The Earthly Republic*, ed. Kohl and Witt, 202. However, Jacqueline Musacchio underscores the difference between theory and practice. She notes how most of the items that were part of a wife's *donora* were for personal use—belts, mirrors, and other such items in the service of beauty. Although all prescriptive texts spoke against the vanity of women, beauty was nonetheless an important criterion when men chose their wives, not least because they hoped for beautiful children. See Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, "The Bride and Her *Donora* in Renaissance Florence," in *Culture and Change: Attending to Early Modern Women*, ed. Margaret Mikesell and Adele Seeff (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 177- 202.

⁴³ In book three of *Della famiglia*, Alberti has Giannozzo provide a detailed description of the ways in which a wife should manage the household. See also the instructions Lodovico Dolce gives in *Dialogo della institutione*. He writes, for example, that "The good housewife should take care that no part of the house, no place, no household goods are hidden from her. She should look everywhere, think of everything, go everywhere [...]." See *Women in Italy*, ed. Rogers and Tinagli, 154.

good mothers were expected to intercede on behalf of their sons in the social realm.⁴⁴

As the perfect wife, a woman was sometimes also urged to function as a conduit of religiosity. As noted in chapter two, in the thirteenth-century *Summa Confessorum* of Thomas Chobham, priests are told that in every confession they should urge wives to be their husbands' preachers and to warn wives that, if their husbands sin, it is their own fault. The popularity and wide circulation of this confessional manual (more than a hundred manuscripts survive, and it was printed twice during the 1480s) make it quite plausible that women were given the same message even into the 1500s.⁴⁵

VI. Conflict and Anxiety in the Prescriptive Literature on Womanhood

The prescriptive discourse on women and mothers contained not only the humanist literature on marriage and education, but also medical treatises which discussed the female body, women's health, and childbearing. The humanist treatises on generation and procreation—whether as a result of adopting the teachings of classical natural philosophy or reflecting the needs and claims of Renaissance patriarchal ideology—minimized the mother's contribution to the child and emphasized the form-giving powers of the father's semen. However, in popular, lay medical thought, the generative powers of the mother were perceived as more potent than the discourse of humanism

⁴⁴ Alexandre-Bidon demonstrates how the performance of an ideal mother required her to intercede on behalf of her children, especially her sons, and how she was expected to establish for them networks of family, friends, and acquaintances. An ideal wife and mother was invested in the political and financial success of her sons and felt responsible for the honor of her husband's and son's lineage. See Alexandre-Bidon, "La lettre volée," 986. For an essay by Stanley Chojnacki that deals with this issue, see note 2.

⁴⁵ Sheehan, "Choice of Marriage Partner in the Middle Ages," 157-91.

allowed. According to Park, in Renaissance lay thought the specifics of female anatomy and the physiology of generation create strong physical ties between a mother and her children.⁴⁶ The literature on marriage seems to have been composed with the acknowledgment that men need women to produce the offspring that will continue the patriline. Frigo claims that the abundant production of treatises on choosing a wife during the Renaissance is the result of this tension between the patriarchal dream of autonomy and the unavoidable dependence on the female principle.⁴⁷ Ultimately, patriarchy, an ideology that underscores the centrality of fathers, revolves around the existence of mothers.

The humanist treatises describe the wives and mothers that the authors imagined, not those they observed. And, by prescribing the criteria for choosing a wife and the ideal manifestations of womanhood, they composed a descriptive discourse of the anxieties and desires that underlie the Renaissance construction of womanhood. The prescriptive literature of humanists articulated men's desire to construct females that fit the patriarchal mold and suggested ways of controlling and disciplining them. It is doubtful that many women read these treatises or that the texts were supposed to instruct women on how to improve themselves.⁴⁸ The women they prescribed

⁴⁶ Park, *Secrets of Women*, 115-20, 131. Park offers an illuminating interpretation of a woodcut of an anatomized woman in the 1493 *Fasciculo de medicina*—an influential collection of medical texts in the vernacular—that demonstrates how lay medical thought perceived women to have agency and power with respect to their own bodies. The woodcut depicts a woman in a sitting position who actively reveals her own genitalia. This image in a popular text assigns the woman agency, knowledge of her body, and the power to decide whether or not to share it.

⁴⁷ Frigo, "Dal caos all'ordine," 66.

⁴⁸ The question of whether women read the humanist treatises or whether only their fathers and husbands read them is a vexing one. Park claims that

were constructed, imagined, and described by men for men—for fathers, husbands, and bachelors seeking a wife. The humanist literature, which prescribed the ideal wife and mother, was extremely popular in the sixteenth century⁴⁹ and participated in a discourse of male desire, needs, and fantasies. We may assume that as a popular cultural product it reflected and constructed the ways in which Renaissance men understood gender and the ways it affected the power relations of their culture.

The genre of erudite comedy was also an extremely popular product of Renaissance elite culture, and the playwrights, spectators, and readers of these plays were undoubtedly acquainted with the humanist discourse on gender. In the following two chapters, I examine the discursive relationship between the prescribed humanist images of womanhood and two erudite comedies—*Il commodo* and *La stiava*—in order to inquire into the ways in

there is no evidence that women and midwives read works on women's health, childbearing or generation, including the few vernacular works that were composed on these topics. The treatise that Michele Savonarola dedicated to the women of Ferrara, for example, hardly had any circulation at all: there are only two surviving manuscripts. Park, *Secrets of Women*, 133. Margaret King assumes that, since the treatise was in the Italian vernacular, Savonarola directed his work to female readers. See King, "Mothers of the Renaissance," 213. Helen King offers a counter example by analyzing three dedications from the sixteenth-century editions of the *Gynaeciorum libri*. She assumes that when authors addressed their prefaces to women, they envisioned women as their main readership. See Helen King, *Midwifery, Obstetrics and the Rise of Gynaecology: The Uses of a Sixteenth-Century Compendium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 30-42. Finally, Brian Richardson claims that Dolce intended his *Dialogo*—a translation into the vernacular of Vives's Latin treatise—to be read by women. See Richardson, "'Amore maritale,'" 196.

⁴⁹ Italian and English treatises of this kind printed in the sixteenth century still exist in large numbers, a fact that attests to their huge popularity. See Pamela Joseph Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 6.

which the prescribed images of women were interpreted and dramatized in these plays, and the ways in which patriarchy, masculinity, and femininity were re-conceptualized and negotiated in the site of their dramatic reenactment.

Chapter Four: Renegotiating the Ideal Mother and the Father-Son Conflict in Giovan Maria Cecchi's *La stiava* (1546)

I. The Author and his Cultural Milieu

The Florentine Giovan Maria Cecchi (1518-1587) was the most prolific playwright of sixteenth-century Italy. During his forty-year career, he composed around fifty plays, including twenty-one erudite comedies, and also twenty-nine plays from other genres of drama, such as farce, morality plays, and religious drama.¹ In the later years of his life, after undergoing a religious conversion in Tridentine Florence, Cecchi clearly preferred to write more serious and religious drama, and for that purpose he even rewrote some of his earlier erudite comedies.² The majority of his literary production is drama, but Cecchi also wrote poetry, pastoral eclogues, and Petrarchan sonnets.

Very little is known about the circumstances of Cecchi's life. One of the biggest blows in his life must have been the murder of his father. A few years later his mother died, and at sixteen years of age he had no choice but to assume the responsibilities of the head of the household and become the guardian of his two younger brothers.³ He was a notary, like his father before

¹ Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 64, 118. However, Konrad Eisenbichler, who relies on the *ricordo* of Baccio Cecchi, Giovan Maria's son, lists sixty plays. See his "Introduction," in Giovan Maria Cecchi, *The Horned Owl*, trans. Konrad Eisenbichler (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981), xi. Baccio's *ricordo* is printed in Luigi Fiacchi, ed., *Commedie di Giovan Maria Cecchi*, vol. I (Milan: Le Monnier, 1899), 6-9.

² Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, *Carnival Comedy and Sacred Play: The Renaissance Dramas of Giovan Maria Cecchi* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 15.

³ Eisenbichler, "Introduction," ix. The name of the man who murdered Giovan Maria's father is Fabrino del Grilla da Castagno. There is no information about the reasons for the murder.

him, and seems to have earned a fine living in this profession. The Cecchi family was an old, respectable Florentine family and, although it did not belong to the innermost circle of Florentine governance, its members had been holding public offices from as early as the mid-fourteenth century.⁴ Giovan Maria too held several public offices, but, as with most Florentines who lived during the rule of Duke Cosimo I (from 1537 to 1574), public service did not offer him any real power or authority—it was more like a prize given by the regime to a loyal subject.

Cosimo I and his wife Eleonora sponsored many of the Florentine artists and *litterati* as clients of their court, and scholars have amply discussed how Cosimo perceived the cultural life of Florence to be of great importance for his tightly-run state. He also understood that art could serve the propaganda needs of his regime just as easily as it could serve the regime's dissidents.⁵ Autonomous and informal groups of artists and scholars were simply not allowed to exist. The "Accademia degli Umidi," for example, was an association whose members discussed intellectual and cultural issues, presented their literary work, and performed plays from time to time. In 1542, however, the association was already called the "Accademia Fiorentina" and it became an official institution of the regime, supervising the curriculum in the city's schools and the printing and book trade. Its members gave public talks on a variety of subjects and received stipends and prizes from the state.⁶

⁴ G.M. Cecchi, *Commedie*, ed. Olindo Guerrini (Milan: Edoardo Sonzogno Editore, 1883), 7.

⁵ Armand De Gaetano, "The Florentine Academy and the Advancement of Learning Through the Vernacular," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 30 (1968), 19-52.

⁶ Radcliff-Umstead, *Carnival Comedy and Sacred Play*, 7-10.

Although Cecchi was loyal to Cosimo's regime, he was not a member of the Florentine Academy or of any other official society of scholars. He did not write his plays for the court so much as for lay confraternities of the middle classes, for monasteries and convents, and for the professional classes of lawyers, notaries, and merchants.⁷ While modern scholars still debate when Cecchi began his writing career and how to date some of his works, there is no uncertainty about the popularity of his plays. Ten of his erudite comedies were printed during the sixteenth century,⁸ and his plays were performed often during the carnival season by amateur troupes and at special private events, such as wedding celebrations. Famous *litterati* publicly praised Cecchi's works. Antonfrancesco Grazzini (1503-1584) and Antonfrancesco Doni (ca. 1513-1574), for example, noted how popular Cecchi's works were and recognized their dramatic and literary quality.⁹

One of the recurrent issues in the scholarship on Cecchi's drama is how to classify his theatrical works. Scholars whose criteria are generic characteristics divide his plays into four categories. The first is *commedie osservate*, the term Cecchi coined for his erudite comedies. These plays have five acts, deal with secular subjects, and are modeled after the Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence. The second category, *commedie spirituali*, refers to comedies in five acts that treat religious subjects. The third is *drammi*

⁷ Andrews notes that by the middle of the sixteenth century the middle classes, and not merely the court and the aristocracy, developed a taste for erudite comedies. See his *Scripts and Scenarios*, 118. See also Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, "Cecchi and the Reconciliation of Theatrical Traditions," *Comparative Drama* 9:2 (1975), 156.

⁸ See Bruno Ferraro, "Catalogo delle opere di G. M. Cecchi," *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 23 (1981), 39-75. Already in 1550, the printer Gabriele Giolito de' Ferrari published a volume compiling all the plays Cecchi had written by then.

⁹ Eisenbichler, "Introduction," xii.

sacri—plays on religious subjects in three acts (Cecchi seems to have modeled these plays after the fifteenth-century Florentine genre of sacred drama, *sacre rappresentazioni*). The fourth category contains farces that mix the secular with the religious, the heroic with the ridiculous.¹⁰ Scholars, who employ literary origins as the criteria, divide Cecchi's plays into three groups: comedies based on Roman comedy, comedies based on the novelle of Boccaccio, and comedies with original plots.¹¹ The difficulty in reaching a consensus on how to divide his works is a mark of Cecchi's creativity. He was prolific throughout his life, and his numerous works are too complex to be reduced to clear types. Even his spiritual plays, for example, are comical and witty.

II. The Composition of *La stiava* and Its Dramatic Origins

Cecchi composed *La stiava*, his fourth play, around 1546. It was performed for the first time that same year by the confraternity of San Bastiano de' Fanciulli.¹² Bruno Ferraro notes three sixteenth-century editions of the play: in the 1550 compilation of Cecchi's works and the reprint in 1551, both from the press of Gabriele Giolito de' Ferrari in Venice and in 1585 by Bernardo Giunti in Venice. Cecchi participated in the literary debate over whether erudite comedies should be in verse, thus imitating the Roman

¹⁰ Eisenbichler, "Introduction," xi.

¹¹ Marvin T. Herrick, *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance* (1960; reprint ed. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 140. Raffaello Rocchi uses similar criteria; see his "Prefazione," in G.M. Cecchi, *Drammi spirituali inediti di Giovanmaria Cecchi, notaio fiorentino del secolo XVI*, vol. I (Florence: Le Monnier, 1895), iii-xcix.

¹² San Bastiano was a Florentine lay youth confraternity founded in 1442. See Lorenzo Polizzotto, *Children of the Promise: The Confraternity of the Purification and the Socialization of Youths in Florence, 1427-1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

comedy, or in prose, thus mimicking everyday speech. While most playwrights chose to write in prose,¹³ Cecchi was the exception to the rule: Ferraro's catalog shows that the majority of his erudite comedies—fifteen of them—were in verse. *La stiava*, however, belongs to the opening stage of his writing career, when he was still writing in prose. The 1550 and 1551 editions of the play are, therefore, in prose. But Cecchi rewrote the play in verse (along with *La dote*, *La moglie*, and *Gl'incantesimi*) for the 1585 Giunti edition. The verse version was bowdlerized of anti-clerical and sexual comments and even contained new characters.¹⁴

The plays of Plautus were an important source of inspiration for Cecchi, and *La stiava* closely follows Plautus' *Mercator* (The Merchant). But Cecchi adapted the original play to the sixteenth-century Italian context and to the middle-class mentality of his audience.¹⁵ Plautus's play takes place in Athens—the plot of *La stiava* transpires in Genoa. Plautus's *senex* is transformed in *La stiava* into a savvy merchant who almost cannot help but enjoy tricking and deceiving his son. The character of the young girl is still a slave, but whereas in Plautus's play the young man takes her as his concubine, in Cecchi's play the young man marries her. The “happy ending” in *La stiava* can be reached only when the respectable lineage of the girl is discovered. Finally, while modern readers of the play might consider anachronistic Cecchi's decision to keep the young girl a slave as in Plautus's play, slavery did in fact exist in sixteenth-century Italy. Most slaves, however,

¹³ Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 118.

¹⁴ James A. Parente, Jr., review of *The Slave Girl*, by Giovan Maria Cecchi, ed. and trans. Bruno Ferraro, *Renaissance Studies* 13:1 (March 1999), 100.

¹⁵ Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 141.

were women of Tartar origin, and Cecchi's decision to change the background of the girl-slave and turn her into an Italian girl is significant, for this is the device that allows the happy ending in which two respectable Italian families join through marriage.¹⁶

III. The Plot

The plot of *La stiava* runs as follows: Alfonso, a young man from a merchant family in Genoa, tells the audience how he met and fell in love with a slave girl named Adelfia while he was taking care of his family's business in Constantinople. After secretly marrying the girl, he returns home at his father's request, but since he is anxious both that other men will desire his wife and that his father will discover he married a slave, Alfonso hides Adelfia in the family's ship.

It appears that Alfonso's anxiety is justified because, when his father Filippo discovers Adelfia (Alfonso tells him that he bought her as a gift for his mother), he wants her for himself. Just like his son, Filippo conceals his true intentions and tells Alfonso that he wants to sell the slave-girl to a friend. Alfonso suspects his father's intentions and naturally does all he can to thwart his father's plans for Adelfia. He even discloses his situation to his friend Ippolito and asks him to take Adelfia and hide her until he can figure out what to do. Filippo too has disclosed his situation to a friend, Nastagio, who is also Ippolito's father. Before Ippolito can help Alfonso and hide Adelfia, Nastagio snatches the girl and hides her in his house, as Filippo has asked him to do. Unfortunately for Nastagio, though, his wife returns to the city earlier than

¹⁶ Radcliff-Umstead, "Cecchi and the Reconciliation of Dramatic Traditions," 158.

expected, discovers Adelfia in the house, and causes such a scandal that Nastagio is forced to remove the girl. While he is taking Adelfia to a new hiding place—this time not in the home of a respectable man, but in the premises of a procuress—Adelfia drops a box containing a few personal items. Nastagio's wife discovers the box, and realizes that the girl is their long-lost daughter, who was abducted by the Moors years earlier.

Since Adelfia turns out to be not merely from a respectable Italian family, but his friend's daughter, Filippo is forced to suppress his sexual desire and agrees to let his son marry her. Thus Alfonso's clandestine marriage to Adelfia becomes public and socially accepted and the two families strengthen their social networks since Filippo and Nastagio are now not merely *amici* and *vicini* but *parenti*; they are not only friends, but also in-laws.

IV. The Father-Son Conflict

La stiava concludes by reaffirming the importance of the normative social networks in the social fabric of Renaissance Florence: resolution is reached at the end of the play only when the relationships between neighbors, friends, and in-laws function as conduits of social negotiation. Because, moreover, the play ends with Filippo and Nastagio deciding to marry their children to each other, fathers are presented as standing at the nexus of these social networks.

The centrality of fathers is emphasized even further when we consider the position of mothers. The play presents three mother-characters—Alfonso's mother (who is also Filippo's wife), Ippolito's mother (Nastagio's wife), and the nurse Nuta, the surrogate-mother of Ippolito and Adelfia. But the three women receive very little stage time. In fact, Alfonso's mother, Gismonda, receives no

stage time at all: we only hear about her from her son Alfonso, her son's friend Ippolito, and her husband Filippo. As we have seen, the mother-character in Machiavelli's *Clizia*, Sofronia, is also described by her husband, her son, and her son's friend. Before she makes an entrance in the third scene of the second act, the three men describe her as a jealous and emotional woman. When Sofronia appears on the scene, however, her character takes on a completely different shape, because it is no longer constructed solely through the men's perceptions. Sofronia shapes her own identity as a wife and mother and asserts herself as a strong-willed, rational, and steady woman. But in *Lastiava* the character of the mother Gismonda never receives her own voice, and she is perceived through the eyes of the men alone.

The male construction of Gismonda is apparent, for example, in II:2, when the father, Filippo, and his son, Alfonso, meet after the latter's return from the long trip he took for the family business. The meeting is fraught with dramatic tension for several reasons. Earlier in the play, Alfonso describes how his mother could not stop hugging him when they met after his long absence from home. Since Alfonso returned safely after a long journey, since he successfully acquired many goods, and since one parent acknowledged how much his return is welcomed, one might assume that, at the least, the father-son reunion will be affectionate, if not as emotional as that between the mother and son. The dramatic tension arises after Alfonso's servant, Gorgoglio, warns his master that Filippo has seen Adelfia, and that, when he asked who she was, Gorgoglio told him that Alfonso bought her as a servant for his mother (I:2). The audience also knows by now that Filippo has become enamored with Adelfia and is determined to obtain her for himself (I:3).

Hence, the father-son reunion occurs against the backdrop of hidden desires, secrets, and lies. The two men deceive each other, each in his attempt to have Adelfia for himself: Filippo tells Alfonso that he would like to sell the girl to a friend of the family to whom they owe some favors, and Alfonso tells his father that he too wishes to sell her to a friend—a young and rich friend to whom he promised the girl. Both men allege friendship as the excuse for taking possession of Adelfia, and both share their true situation only with their friends—Filippo asks Nastagio for help and Alfonso consults his friend Ippolito. In fact, Filippo and Alfonso mirror each other’s taste in women, strategic thinking, and the execution of their plans.

This is a comical and, perhaps for a few members of the audience, also a distorted expression of the cultural ideal of “like father, like son.”¹⁷ Medical writings during the Renaissance frequently examined the respective contributions of the father and the mother in the conception of their children.¹⁸ Because the Italian social elites defined family membership and lineage by biological descent through the male blood line, sons were perceived as an extension of their fathers.¹⁹ The more the sons resembled their fathers—in physical appearance, character, and behavior—the more ideal they were since the fathers could be certain that their heirs were, in fact, their biological

¹⁷ Radcliff-Umstead suggests that in this way Alfonso and Ippolito function as agents of comic reversal. See *Carnival Comedy*, 63.

¹⁸ Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 109-13.

¹⁹ Jane Fair Bestor, “Ideas about Procreation and Their Influence on Ancient and Medieval Views of Kinship,” in *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, eds. David I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 150-67. See also Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 25.

offspring. The character of Alfonso is constructed to resemble his father, but, ironically, the son mirrors his father's faults, not his virtues.

V. The Function and the Representation of the Mother—The Men's Perspective

The dialogue between Filippo and Alfonso also reveals that they mirror each other by expecting the wife and mother Gismonda to mediate between them and function as a peacemaker. When they cannot agree on who should have the right to sell Adelfia to a friend, Filippo tells his son,

Alfonso, so far there has never been any discord between us, and none will occur over this matter. Pick up the slave girl from the ship, take her home, give her to your mother. There is no hurry [literally, time is not hunting us down]. Later, when we calm down [literally, our blood cools], and we're together with your mother, we'll consult whether it is better to keep her [the slave] for ourselves, or to give her to others, and to whom.

Alfonso, insino a ora non è stato tra noi discordia, e non ce ne sarà già per lo avvenire. Cava la stiava di nave, conducila a casa, consegnala a tua madre. Il tempo non ci caccia. A bell'agio, a sangue freddo noi saremo insieme, e vi sarà tua madre, e quivi consulteremo se egli è meglio tenerla per noi, o darla ad altri, e a chi. (II:2)²⁰

Alfonso immediately agrees to this suggestion, and soon after Filippo tells the audience that, had he not suggested this course of action, there was little

²⁰ Giovan Maria Cecchi, *La stiava*, in *Giovan Maria Cecchi: Commedie*, ed. Olindo Guerrini (Milano: Edoardo Sonzogno, 1883), 185.

chance his son would have handed Adelfia over to him. By assigning to Gismonda the conventional female role of a *mediatrix*, Filippo discloses how he perceives the nature of the relationship between himself, his son, and his wife. He assumes that the son will accept his mother's position as a mediator and will listen to her advice. He also assumes that he himself does not hold the power to persuade his son and that his wife affects his son in a way he cannot.

The mother-son bond is further explored as a potential danger to paternal authority when Alfonso, believing his father's tale about selling Adelfia to an old friend, asks Ippolito for help and advice. In response, the first counsel that Ippolito gives Alfonso is to turn to Gismonda for support:

I advise you that the first thing you do is to find your mother. Tell her of the dispute, convince her to support the case of this youth, and tell her that you have already promised her to him, and that he saved your life once, and that she has you back because of his help. Invent some danger; make up a long and terrifying tale, and tell [your mother] all of it. These things will move her a lot.

Consiglioti che la prima cosa tu trovi tua madre. Contale la lite, persuadila che favorisca la parte di questo giovane, di' che tu gnene hai promessa, e che egli ti campò già la vita, e che la ti ha riavuto per aiuto di lui. Fingi qualche pericolo; fa la favola lunga, e spaventosa, e contala tutta. Queste cose la [the mother] moveranno assai. (II:3)²¹

Ippolito assumes that the first thing one should do when one is in distress is to turn to one's mother for help. Here, too, *La stiava* recalls to mind *Clizia*, since

²¹ *Commedie*, ed. Guerrini, 187.

Filippo's uncontrollable desire for the young girl echoes Nicomaco's infatuation with Clizia. In both plays, the fathers and their sons compete over the same object of desire and in both plays the mother-son relationship is portrayed as a pact that endangers paternal authority.

Ippolito provides three reasons for assuming that in a dispute between father and son Gismonda will support the latter: she will understand that Alfonso has already promised to sell Adelfia to his friend; she will understand that this promise is all the more binding since the friend has saved Alfonso's life; she herself will feel obligated to the friend for saving her son's life. Ultimately, Ippolito does not portray the connection between mother and son merely in emotional terms, or as affection based on the physical experience of giving birth. He articulates a binding relationship, layered with the vocabulary of commitment, obligation, and debt.

After providing an understanding of Gismonda's motives that considers her identity as a mother, Ippolito moves on to consider her identity as a wife. He suggests that Alfonso tell his mother that he suspects his father may want the slave girl for himself.²² And when Alfonso replies that he doubts this is the case, Ippolito dismisses his objection and claims that "all wives are jealous of their husbands."²³ Ippolito represents Gismonda first and foremost as a committed mother and only later as a jealous wife; he represents her maternity as a relationship that leads to an honorable commitment to repay debts, but her wifehood as a relationship based on negative emotions.

Ippolito is mistaken about this last point, since Alfonso, who is disappointed about his failure to recruit his mother to his cause, says that

²² "Oltre a ciò dille che tu hai sospetto che tuo padre non la voglia per sè." *La stiava*, II:3, in *Commedie*, ed. Guerrini, 187.

²³ "Tutte le donne sono gelose de' mariti." *Ibid.*

Even my mother didn't show much interest in the suspicions that I provided her about my father. In fact, she made fun of me in such a way that I realized she believes I warned her of this more out of the love I have for the slave than for the suspicions I have about the old man [Alfonso's father]: and thus neither with her, nor at the harbor, have I achieved what I wanted.

Anco mia madre non ha mostro di tener molto conto del sospetto che io ho voluto darli di mio padre. Anzi che così sogghignando m'ha di sorte motteggiato, che io ho inteso, che ella crede ch'io faccia questo avvisarnela più tosto per l'amore che io porti alla stiava, che per rispetto del vecchio: e così nè con lei, nè al porto ho fatto cosa ch'io voglia.

(III:3)²⁴

Alfonso describes Gismonda as having the advantage of maternal insights and acting (or in this instance, choosing not to act) in accordance with her intimate knowledge of her son—not out of any motivation as a wife. Once again, Gismonda's identity as a mother looms larger than her identity as a wife.

The first portrayal of Gismonda appears at the beginning of the play when Alfonso describes how

Because having left her [Adelfia] just now on board the ship to come and greet my family, I was forced to break off in the midst of the tender embraces that my mother gave me, and to go out, and return to the harbor!

²⁴ *Commedie*, ed. Guerrini, 192.

Poichè, avendo lasciatala pur ora in nave per venir a far motto a' miei di casa, è stato forza che, lasciando a mezzo interrotti li abbracciamenti e le carezze che mi faceva mia madre, io me ne esca fuori, e ritorni verso il porto! (I:1)²⁵

Gismonda's character is thus first constructed around the loving way in which she welcomes back her son. But, more than that, Alfonso's description portrays maternal love and conjugal love (or desire) as competing emotions. Alfonso does not believe he can renew the relationship with his mother and at the same time protect the relationship with his wife, and he posits maternal affection at home as competing with his desire for his new wife.

Gismonda is presented first and foremost as a mother, as a woman motivated by her knowledge of, and affection and commitment towards, her son rather than her husband. Gismonda's motherhood is not performative, but descriptive: she is invisible, purely a construct of the men's descriptions. And, while the men present her as a mediator, a peacemaker, and a judge, the audience is made aware of the irony behind these social conventions about maternal roles. Gismonda's husband and son wish to enlist her as a mediator, but the harmony and understanding they hope to reach will be acquired at her expense: they both lie to her about the real situation and attempt to manipulate her as a conduit of deception by using her as a front to disguise their true, sexual desires. Thus, in *La stiava* the functions demanded of an ideal wife and mother are subverted to fulfill the motives of the men, just as the ideal relationship of "like father, like son" is subverted to underscore the father's faults.

²⁵ *Commedie*, ed. Guerrini, 175.

VI. The Mother as a Free Agent

The other mother-character in *La stiava* is Giovanna, Ippolito's mother and Nastagio's wife. Unlike Gismonda, she is physically present on stage and appears in four scenes in the third act. To Nastagio's horror, Giovanna returns earlier than expected from their country house and discovers that her husband is keeping a young girl in their city house and that he has even hired a cook to prepare an uncommonly indulgent meal. The girl is of course Adelfia whom Nastagio has agreed to hide for Filippo until the latter can have his way with her. The cook was in fact hired by Filippo.

Giovanna, however, refuses to believe that the girl is in their house for any other reason but to satisfy Nastagio's sexual desire, and she responds on three levels to her husband's perceived betrayal: she expresses her emotions by complaining, shouting at him, and causing a scandal on the street; she notes how unfairly her husband has treated her considering the generous dowry she brought into their marriage; and she calls for her brothers to come to her aid. By mentioning her dowry, Giovanna underscores that her role as a wife is the result of a transaction based on reciprocity of obligation. By turning to her brothers for help, Giovanna also underscores where she came from and to whom she is still tied: while she does not trust her husband, she relies on the strength of the relationship between herself and her natal family. She is quick to suspect her husband and is anything but the prescribed ideal of a meek, patient, and obedient wife. Her performance of wifedom, moreover, underscores the temporary and unstable nature of this social role: the wife's dowry and her natal identity are deposits of power that could undermine the husband's authority.

The contingent nature of Giovanna's identity as a wife is emphasized even more when compared to the way she functions as a mother. After learning that there is a young girl in the house, she turns to her maid Nuta and asks "Who could have brought this woman in here?" In response Nuta, who was Ippolito's nurse, replies that "It must have been Ippolito, because these young men tend to, when they have free rein inside the house [literally, when they have a free house], to get into mischief ["trescano," i.e., young men tend to use the empty house for their love affairs]."²⁶ While the nurse is quick to fault Ippolito for the presence of the girl, his mother defends him without any hesitation:

Meino [a servant] told me that Ippolito had gone to the villa of Messer Giulio. No, no, it will actually be the doing of my good husband.

Meino mi disse che Ippolito era in villa di M. Giulio. No no, ella sarà più tosto per conto del mio buon marito. (III:4)²⁷

Giovanna distrusts her husband, not her son, and she is correct, of course. The trust and true knowledge she has of her son are heightened when compared with Nuta's assumption. Ippolito's old nurse has raised him since infancy, and she refers to him as "my son" ("figliuol mio").²⁸ Yet this surrogate mother cannot compare with the maternal qualities of Giovanna: biological motherhood is presented as a conduit of trust and knowledge.

²⁶ "Giovanna: Chi ci può aver condotta questa femmina? Nuta: O sarà stato il vostro [Ip]Polito, che questi garzonacci, quando egli hanno la casa libera, e' la trescano a lor modo." *La stiava*, III:4, in *Commedie*, ed. Guerrini, 194.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *La stiava*, IV:3, in *Commedie*, ed. Guerrini, 201.

Not merely does the mother trust her son and know him better than his nurse does, but it seems that the nurse is not to be trusted herself. In V:6, Nastagio tells Filippo that fifteen years earlier Nuta was responsible for accompanying his daughter back to Italy from Ischia. But the nurse failed to protect her charge, and the girl, who, as we soon learn, is Adelfia, was kidnapped by the Moors. In this way, the surrogate mother-figure is presented as someone who not only fails to know the character of her milk-son or to establish an emotional bond of trust with him, but also fails to provide physical protection to her charges. These failures of the nurse only emphasize the ways in which the qualities that make up Giovanna's performance of motherhood are irreplaceable.

VII. The Virtue of Non-Virtuous Mothers and the Failure of Fatherhood

Paradoxically, it is precisely because Giovanna does not perform according to the prescribed images of ideal Renaissance wives that she excels in her performance as a mother. As the dialogue between Nuta and Ippolito reveals, Giovanna has acquired a reputation as an indiscreet, quarrelsome wife who is anything but the patient, peacemaking, ideal wife. Nuta tells Ippolito that when Giovanna discovered the girl inside the house, she created a big scandal that entertained the whole neighborhood. Ippolito responds that this is the usual custom of his mother, but Nuta tells him that this time Giovanna had a very good reason for her loud behavior.²⁹

²⁹ "Nuta: [...] ella è stata cagione d'un grande scandolo, e s'è stato per far bello il vicinato. Ippolito: L'usanza vostra [...] Nuta: O non dire che questa volta ell'aveva troppo ragione." *La stiava*, IV:3, in *Commedie*, ed. Guerrini, 201.

But it is precisely, if accidentally, the discord that Giovanna spreads as a wife that turns her into a protective mother: to prevent the gossip, the public humiliation, and the loss of reputation that Giovanna's loud behavior might cause, Nastagio removes Adelfia from their home in a great hurry. In the process of doing so, the girl drops a box containing a chain, a pendant, and a notation of the date and place where the pirates kidnapped her. The box is soon discovered by Giovanna, who, after examining the objects it contains, realizes that Adelfia is their long lost daughter. Nastagio informs Filippo of the discovery and, ignorant of the fact that their children have already been married in secret, suggests that Alfonso marry Adelfia. Filippo accepts Adelfia as his daughter-in-law, instead of as his lover, and the bond between the two families is strengthened.

Giovanna is thus unintentionally the agent of social order and conventional mores: by being her usual self as a loud, indiscreet, impatient, and distrusting wife, she causes such tumult that Adelfia drops the objects that establish her natal identity. Moreover, although Nastagio had his daughter under his roof for a while, he never discovered her true identity. It is the mother who establishes the identity of the girl, protects her from the sexual designs of the men, and changes the girl's status from a slave with no rights to a daughter and soon-to-be daughter-in-law. In contrast, the fathers—Adelfia's biological father and her father-in-law—kidnap, hide, and (in Filippo's case) intend to possess her sexually.

The mother recognizes the identity of the girl and thereby enables the restoration of familial harmony and social order. The men in the play—the old and the young alike—subvert social conventions, cause discord, and are responsible for a situation in which father and son compete with, and deceive,

each other. An inter-generational conflict exists between Filippo and Alfonso: Alfonso is unaware that his father actually wants Adelfia for himself, and when his friend Ippolito suggests this, he responds in disbelief. Filippo too is unaware that his son wants the slave for himself and believes that Alfonso had promised the girl to a friend. Nonetheless, he is determined to obtain Adelfia for himself and exclaims: "Well, well, I really have scored one against this Alfonso, who holds himself so wise and cunning."³⁰

The father competes with his son as if he were just another stranger, another young man to whom he needs to prove his virility. It is almost as though Filippo understands the relationship with his son as a business exchange in which one does one's best to trick the competition. In the context of this competitive relationship, he cares nothing for his son's feelings or reputation. Filippo believes his son's lie about having promised Adelfia to a friend to whom he owes many favors. Yet he is not concerned that his son's reputation might be harmed if he is forced to break his promise and cannot repay his debt.

The father-son relationship in *La stiava* is not merely devoid of trust, but one in which the father takes joy in actively deceiving his son. Filippo is certain, for example, that Alfonso will follow his suggestion to do nothing until they consult with Gismonda. Meanwhile, however, Filippo admits that he intends to trick his son and take the slave girl while the son still trusts him. He betrays his son by using the trust that his son has in him as a weapon.³¹ The Renaissance ideal of a patrilineal social system that relies on the bond

³⁰ "O vedi, vedi, che l'ho carica a questo mio Alfonso, che si tiene si savio e si scalterito!" *La stiava*, III:1, in *Commedie*, ed. Guerrini, 189.

³¹ "e cosi mentre che 'l mio figliuolo si fida, e io gnene fregherò." *La stiava*, II:2, in *Commedie*, ed. Guerrini, 185.

between fathers and sons is subverted by the father— ultimately, by the one who should be most invested in the strength of this bond.

In contrast to the father-son relationship, the male relationships that take place within the same age group seem to have a different quality to them—in *La stiava* peers do not compete, but assist each other. In fact, the prologue identifies two lessons that the audience should learn from the play: how love causes pain and how one should treat a friend. Ippolito is presented as the exemplum for the latter: from the moment he learns of Alfonso's troubles, Ippolito willingly offers his support, counsel, and practical assistance.

The unique nature of the friendship that the young establish becomes clear when we compare it to the friendship between the two fathers. When Filippo asks his friend Nastagio to help him trick his son and wife so he can obtain Adelfia for himself, Nastagio is reluctant. He tries to serve as the voice of reason and reminds Filippo of his advanced age and diminished virility; he tries to serve as the voice of social respectability and explains to Filippo how ridiculous it seems when a bearded, white-headed man like Filippo pursues a young girl; he tries to dissuade Filippo by asking about his friend's wife (I:5). One could assume that Nastagio does all this as a concerned friend. When all of his appeals to reason fail, he reluctantly agrees to help Filippo by hiding Adelfia in his house. But when Nastagio's wife discovers the girl and all hell breaks loose, Nastagio quickly demands that Filippo find someone else to help him, demonstrating that, if made to choose between his friendship with Filippo and a calm and happy wife, he would choose the latter (IV:4, 5).

There is a marked difference in the nature of the friendships that the younger and older generations establish: Ippolito is patient with his enamored friend and accepts Alfonso's temper and foolishness in stride. In the second

scene of the fourth act, for example, Ippolito informs Alfonso that Adelfia was taken away from the ship. When the distraught Alfonso lashes out at Ippolito, the latter does not abandon his friend and the two young men quickly reconcile. Ippolito's father, however, is not so patient with his friend and he is certainly not as committed to help Filippo as his son is determined to help Alfonso. Differences in age, experience, social standing, and family situation influence the nature of friendships, and the prologue of *La stiava* privileges the kind of friendship that the sons maintain. Ultimately, the horizontal relationships between peers of the older generation are almost as weak as the relationships that they establish with their sons. The fathers in the play fail to establish lasting bonds based on trust, on loyalty, or even on mutual interests. Indeed, in a patriarchal culture whose construction of masculine identity depends on the strength of the father-image, this is a serious failing.

Chapter Five: Prescribing the Ideal Mother in Antonio Landi's *Il commodo* (1539)

I. The Context of *Il commodo*

1. The Event

In July 1539, Duke Cosimo I, the new and young ruler of Florentine Tuscany, married Eleonora of Toledo, daughter of the Spanish viceroy of the kingdom of Naples. The wedding celebrations included a processional entrance into Florence, a banquet with an allegorical *Trionfo* (in which Cosimo was praised in song and dance), and the performance of a comedy. The comedy was Antonio Landi's *Il commodo*.¹ Landi was commissioned to write the play specifically for the high profile wedding. In what follows, I discuss the event for which Landi composed it, the context of performance, and the audience.²

¹ A. M. Nagler, *Theatre Festivals of the Medici 1539-1637* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 5.

² The details of the wedding festivities appear in an account by Pierfrancesco Giambullari. The text—*Apparato et feste nelle noze dello Illustrissimo Signor Duca di Firenze, et della Duchessa sua consorte, con le sue stanze, madriali, comedia, et intermedii, in quelle recitati*—was published in August 1539, a month after Cosimo's and Eleonora's wedding. Although it is presented as a letter to Giovanni Bandini, Cosimo's ambassador to the emperor, it was most probably screened and approved by the duke and his officials. Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly argues that publications describing spectacles became a constant element in the political and cultural propaganda of European regimes during the early sixteenth century. Since festival books were publications on behalf of the organizers of the festival, they did not offer a realistic representation of what took place. These texts offered instead an idealized description of the spectacle and, one might say, an interpretation of the spectacle that told readers what elements in the spectacle were important enough to receive a literary representation. The festival books reenacted the theatrical events and thereby reenacted existing structures of power. See Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, "Early Modern European Festivals—Politics and Performance, Event and Record," in *Court Festivals of the European*

Before the performance proper, many of those who would soon be in the audience escorted the young couple into Florence. The procession walked through the Porta al Prato and under a triumphal arch that the artist Niccolò Tribolo designed. The arch presented the allegorical figure of Fertility and her children standing between Security and Eternity.³ The people who accompanied the aristocratic couple as well as bystanders were thus reminded of the significance of the occasion—the marriage between Cosimo and Eleonora—and the hope that the young wife would provide heirs to the new ruler of Florence. Fertility, Security, and Eternity signified the hope (or expectation) that the marriage would result in children who would provide for their parents in their old age (hence the figure of Security) as well as assure the continuation of the lineage (hence Eternity). The marriage, moreover, would ideally assure the political security and stability of Florence. The audience then attended *Il commodo*, a comedy that underscores even further the importance of the institution of marriage for attaining peace and social order.

Indeed, all the comedies we have examined thus far end with a wedding. But the weddings are achieved in spite of the father-characters, not because of them. In *Il commodo*, however, fathers clearly promote conventional mores and hierarchical order. Whereas in *Clizia* the father desires the girl he has raised as his own daughter and with whom his son is in love, and whereas in *La stiava* the father desires the young girl whom his

Renaissance: Art, Politics and Performance, ed. J. R. Mulryne and Elizabeth Goldring (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 15-25. See also Watanabe-O’Kelly, “The Early Modern Festival Book: Function and Form,” in *Europa Triumphans: Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe*, ed. J. R. Mulryne, Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly, and Margaret Shewring (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 3-17.

³ Nagler, *Theatre Festivals of the Medici*, 5-6.

enamored son has secretly married, in *Il commodo* the competition for the young woman, Porfiria, is not inter-generational. Rather, peers belonging to the adolescent age-group compete for the woman. Moreover, while fathers are presented as mediums of stability and resolution, mothers are presented as either helpless or outright dangerous. Landi constructs paternal figures that correspond to the Renaissance ideal of the authoritative father and head of a household. Unlike the plays we have examined thus far, father-figures in *Il commodo* are not construed as the source of the dramatic conflict. Rather, young men and women—who are dispossessed of any social and political authority—are the source of discord and those that challenge conventional behavior.

Two levels of significance derive from the fact that *Il commodo* was written and performed for the wedding of Cosimo I. First, by presenting strong paternal figures that facilitate social resolution through the institution of marriage, the play reaffirms the existing structures of power for its aristocratic audience; it promotes to the court a hierarchy of power based on a patriarchal ideology of gender. Second, Cosimo's age (he was twenty years old on his wedding day) placed him in the age-group perceived as potentially the most disruptive to the social order—young, single men who were sexually active but without the responsibilities of heads of families. *Il commodo's* second level of significance, therefore, is pedagogical—on his wedding day, the young duke is presented with an image of strong and wise paternal figures. In this way, the play addresses the deeply rooted anxiety of the older generation of adults that they will be dismissed as irrelevant by the young and virile (Landi was 33 at the time and, in accordance with Renaissance conceptions of age, belonged to the life stage of adulthood whereas Cosimo was still considered a youth).

2. Location of the Performance and Its Symbolism

Il commodo was performed on July 9, 1539, in the courtyard of Palazzo Medici on Via Larga.⁴ The choice of location cannot have been arbitrary: in 1457 Cosimo *il vecchio* (1389-1464), the man who began the process that would eventually establish the unrivalled supremacy of the Medici in Tuscany, moved his family into the new palace. But Cosimo's lineage (from the Cafaggiolo branch of the family) ended when Alessandro de' Medici was murdered in 1537. Although the new Medici ruler, Duke Cosimo I, descended from Cosimo *il vecchio* on his mother's side, in the Florentine patrilineal system the male lineage was the most significant, and on his father's side he descended from the "minor" branch of the family whose origins went back to Lorenzo, Cosimo the elder's brother. In 1540 the duke would move his court into the Palazzo della Signoria, but in 1539 the Medicean center of power was still the old house on Via Larga, which served as the stage for Cosimo's marriage.

The wedding festivities were a performance of Cosimo's authority, and Palazzo Medici was the theatre in which the performance took place.⁵ The walls around the courtyard were decorated with paintings of triumphant moments in the history of the Medici—beginning with the 1434 return of Cosimo *il vecchio* from exile—and before the performance of *Il commodo*

⁴ Nagler, *Theatre Festivals of the Medici*, 9.

⁵ The three-year period during which Cosimo resided in Palazzo Medici is generally neglected by historians. Roger Crum, however, argues that Cosimo's residence in the house was of great importance to his political education because the house taught him, so to speak, how to cleverly manipulate art, architecture, and patronage for statecraft. See Roger J. Crum, "Lessons from the Past: the Palazzo Medici as Political 'Mentor' in Sixteenth-Century Florence," in *The Cultural Politics of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2001), 47-62.

began, Flora, an allegorical representation of Florence, showed her subservience to Cosimo.⁶ The allegorical figures of Pisa, Volterra, Arezzo, Cortona, Pistoia, and the Tiber also appeared in the courtyard, singing of their loyalty to, and admiration for, the young ruler. All in all, Cosimo was publicly proclaiming that Florence belonged to the Medici, establishing his connection to his forebears and asserting his legitimacy to rule in Tuscany. The performance of *Il commodo* took place within this theatre of power.

II. The Plot and the Main Conflict

There are three young men in *Il commodo*⁷ and two of them, the twenty-year-old Demetrio and Cammillo, compete for the hand and heart of the same girl, Porfiria. The third young man in the play is Porfiria's brother, Leandro, who is in love with another young girl, Faustina, the daughter of Messer Ricciardo and Cassandra. The plot follows the men's attempts to get the girls they want and the complications that arise from the involvement of other characters.

The first young man we encounter, Demetrio, arrives in Pisa from Palermo on behalf of his employer. He has no parents, no family connections, and no bonds of friendships that we know of. His only ally is his servant, Libano, and together the two men contrive a plan to get Porfiria. The other young man who is in love with Porfiria, Cammillo, is the spoiled rascal son of Lamberto. Between gambling and drinking, he also finds the time to beg his

⁶ Henk Th. van Veen, *Cosimo I de' Medici and his Self-Representation in Florentine Art and Culture*, trans. Andrew P. McCormick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9-10.

⁷ I have used the edition of *Il commodo* printed by Benedetto Giunta (Florence, 1539).

father to arrange his marriage to Porfira, but Lamberto withholds his consent since the young girl's origins are unknown. Porfira's brother Leandro desires Faustina, but her father Ricciardo, a notary, dismisses Leandro's courtship on the same grounds that his neighbor Lamberto dismisses Leandro's sister. Porfira.

The conflict concerning the young people in love further intensifies because Cassandra, Ricciardo's wife, desires Leandro as a husband for her daughter. Ricciardo and Cassandra argue about this, and since Ricciardo does not trust his wife to follow his wishes, he instructs her to stay inside the house and not to intervene in matters that are out of her domain. Cassandra, however, disobeys her husband's orders and lets Leandro inside the house. Ricciardo discovers this, punishes his wife, locks Leandro inside the house, and calls for the state authorities to punish the young man.

When Demetrio learns of Leandro's troubles from his servant Libano, he easily sympathizes with Leandro since he too is in love. He attempts to help Leandro by ordering Libano to warn Leandro's household about the young man's situation. The only parental figure that the orphaned Leandro and Porfira have, however, is the nurse Lesbia, but she is clueless about how to help. Leandro's life is saved only when the nurse's husband—Manoli—appears and reveals that Leandro and Porfira were separated from their family by the Turks, and that they are the children of his deceased noble master. Manoli also discloses that Demetrio is Leandro's and Porfira's brother. When family connections and lineages are clear, Lamberto allows his son Cammillo to marry Porfira, Demetrio relinquishes his claims after realizing that he and Porfira are siblings, and Ricciardo allows Leandro to marry Faustina.

III. Motherhood, Fatherhood, and Conflict Resolution

1. Surrogate Motherhood—the “Milk Mother”

The marriages at the end of the play and the restoration of social order are arranged by the three father-characters: Lamberto, Ricciardo, and the *balia* Manoli.⁸ The two maternal figures that appear in the play do not facilitate the resolution. Harmony is achieved in spite of them, and not because of them. The first maternal figure is Lesbia, Leandro’s and Porfiria’s nurse, who raised the two orphaned siblings since their infancy. As the nurse that reared them, she functions as a surrogate mother-figure, as the “milk mother,” even more so because she did so in the absence of their biological mother.

Lesbia is required to protect her young charges on two separate occasions, and both times she fails to function as a protective maternal figure. The first occasion presents itself when Libano, Demetrio’s servant, helps his master to contact the object of his desire, Porfiria, by taking advantage of the fact that Porfiria’s brother Leandro is infatuated with Faustina. Libano tells Leandro that, since he himself lives just across from Faustina’s house, he can provide Leandro the opportunity to contact her. The eager Leandro follows Libano into the latter’s bedroom and leaves Porfiria behind under the care of their house servants, hoping for a chance to see and, perhaps, even talk with Faustina. Libano locks Leandro inside the room, as he had planned from the beginning, allowing Demetrio to take advantage of Leandro’s absence. Demetrio can then disguise himself with Leandro’s coat and is let into latter’s house by Lesbia.⁹

⁸ The *balia*’s husband.

⁹ *Il comodo* (II), 98-103, (III), 116-17, (IV), 140-43.

By letting the infatuated young man into the house, Lesbia endangers the reputation and chastity of Porfiria. In fact, Demetrio succeeds not only in entering the house, but, since he is posing as Porfiria's brother, he also climbs into Leandro's bed, pretending to be ill. When Porfiria approaches to attend her supposedly ill brother, Demetrio reveals his identity and begs the young girl to reciprocate his love. Only Porfiria's chastity and resourcefulness get Demetrio out of the house. Although he tries his best to persuade her that he is a friend and has only the strongest love and purest intentions towards her, the girl yells for help. The nurse who failed as the gate keeper of the domestic space in the first place runs to Porfiria's aid but does nothing but yell, pull her hair, and weep. As Porfiria reaches for a dagger to protect her chastity, her nurse just makes a lot of noise.

This surrogate "milk-mother" behaves in a similarly incompetent manner when she is later asked to aid her second charge, Leandro. The enamored youth succeeds in entering the house of Messer Ricciardo with the help of the wife Cassandra and the servant Lucia. When Ricciardo returns unexpectedly, Leandro's life is in danger, and Demetrio sends his servant Libano to notify Leandro's household members. Leandro, however, has no one in the world except for two women—his sister and his nurse. Lesbia is the closest thing that Leandro has to a mother, and she exhibits much care and love towards him but also very little ability to assist him. When she learns from Libano about Leandro's situation, she does little more than cry and bemoan his fate. Libano tells her that "you must do something besides cry and beat your breast in the street" and that she should stop making "so much noise now. Crying now can

help neither him nor you. Think rather about whom you can call to help him.”¹⁰ But the nurse replies that “I don’t know whom to call on and don’t know where to turn. Alas, what is all this? What are these disasters fallen on us today?”¹¹ After wallowing in her sorrow for a while, and after telling Libano about all the ways in which she cannot help Leandro, she decides to tell Porfiria what has happened. This surrogate mother is so helpless that, instead of helping Leandro herself, she decides to ask Porfiria for help. Libano recognizes the futility of this course of action and tells Lesbia that, instead of wasting time in asking the sister for help, she should help Leandro herself. But once again, Lesbia demonstrates her incapacity to function constructively as she resorts to more crying: “I don’t know what to do. And I am sweating all over from sorrow. Oh what a misfortune, oh what a disaster, oh what a catastrophe!”¹²

Lesbia has no social connections, no networks, and no family members to whom she can turn for help. Her humble social class renders her useless since she cannot protect her milk-child and cannot assist him by putting at his disposal her social and familial ties.¹³ In Cecchi’s *La stiava*, the mother’s

¹⁰ Antonio Landi, “A Happy Arrangement or What You Will,” *A Renaissance Entertainment: Festivities for the Marriage of Cosimo I, Duke of Florence, in 1539*, trans. Andrew C. Minor and Bonner Mitchell (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1968), 328. *Il commodo* (V.2), 150: “Bisogna far’altro che piangner nela strada et battersi.” And “Horsù, non tanto romore. Il piagner per adesso non puo giovare ne à lui, ne à voi. Pensate più tosto chi voi potete chiamare per suo soccorso.”

¹¹ *Il commodo*, 151: “Io non sò chi mi chiamare e non sò dove mi ringirare [sic]. ohime, ohime, che cosà è questa? Che disgratie son queste che venute ci sono in questo giorno?”

¹² *A Renaissance Entertainment*, 330. *Il commodo*, 152: “Io no sò che partito mi pigliare, et son tutta sudata per lo affanno, oh che rovina, oh che sciagura, oh che disgratia.”

¹³ Stanley Chojnacki discusses this aspect of patrician maternity in “Patrician Women in Early Renaissance Venice,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 21 (1974), 176-203. See also Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 20.

actions facilitate the resolution, and, by recognizing her daughter, she saves the day. In Landi's *Il comodo*, however, the surrogate mother twice exhibits a failure to act.

Indeed, Lesbia acknowledges that her ignorance of the identity of Leandro's friends is highly problematic in the situation in which he finds himself. But the difficulty seems to lie not merely in the nurse's helplessness or in her lack of social connections. Rather, it seems that Leandro himself has accumulated no friends or useful social connections. In *I libri della famiglia*, Alberti's characters discuss various issues related to wise household management, including friendships. The young Lionardo holds an idealistic image of friendship according to which there is no individuation, but complete enmeshment between friends. A true friend, says Lionardo, "would communicate all things, all wishes, all thoughts to me. All our wealth would be held in common, no more his than mine."¹⁴ The two older Alberti men, Giannozzo and Adovardo, perceive friendship in different terms than Lionardo does. The ever suspicious Giannozzo is less willing to place trust in friendship, but both he and Adovardo share the understanding that friendship can be a valuable resource. Adovardo claims that

Perhaps it is possible in time of peaceful prosperity to live without friends to sustain you. Don't you need them, however, to defend you against injustice and to assist you in adversity?¹⁵

¹⁴ Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence: Book Three*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1994), 109. "Comunicarebbe così tutte le cose, tutte le voglie, tutti e' pensieri; e tutte le nostre fortune insieme sarebbono tra noi non più sue che mie." *I libri della famiglia*, ed. Ruggiero Romano, Alberto Tenenti and Francesco Furlan (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), 236.

¹⁵ Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 113.

Puossi egli questo forse, vivere senza amici e' quali vi sostenghino in pacifica fortuna, difendinvi dagli ingiusti, aiutinvì ne' casi?¹⁶

Leandro's situation is precisely what Alberti's Adovardo was referring to: he has no friends to rely on as resources in times of adversity.

2. Surrogate Fatherhood

Richard Trexler has noted how fathers, in anticipation of their own death, initiated their sons into the social sphere in order to establish networks of support for them. The most important resources orphans could rely on were the ties of family, friends, and patrons,¹⁷ but the fatherless Leandro is deprived of all this. Leandro is rescued only when an adult male intervenes on his behalf: after Lesbia expresses her complete inability to help Leandro, her husband Manoli, who was considered dead for sixteen years, suddenly reappears. Manoli discloses his identity to Lesbia, who is overjoyed at reuniting with her husband, and he tells her what has happened to him in the preceding sixteen years. We learn that Demetrio and Leandro are biological brothers, *carnali fratelli*, and that, unaware of this fact, Demetrio has fallen in love with his sister Porfira. Manoli reminds Lesbia (and, through her, the audience) how the three children were kidnapped by the Turks, along with their father, their nurse Lesbia, and Manoli and that, after she was released from captivity with Leandro and Porfira, he stayed with the children's father until his death.¹⁸

¹⁶ *I libri della famiglia* (III), 241.

¹⁷ See his discussion of Giovanni Morelli in Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 165.

¹⁸ *Il commodo* (V), 162-63.

Manoli thus plays a similar role to that of the mother in *La stiava*: he is responsible for the recognition scene, and, by establishing the identity of the kidnapped siblings, enables the play's happy ending. When the highly respectable identity of the three siblings is revealed, Messer Ricciardo agrees to a marriage between his daughter Faustina and Leandro, Lamberto agrees to a marriage between his son Cammillo and Porfira, and even offers his other daughter to Demetrio.

Manoli successfully functions as a substitute for the deceased biological father of the three children: he is the guardian of the lineage's memory, protects Leandro's physical safety, and arranges good marriages for the three siblings. When the wet-nurse Lesbia fails in her responsibilities as a surrogate mother, her husband Manoli reappears *ex-machina* and takes immediate control of the situation. Manoli's character underscores the significance and the power of fatherhood by functioning successfully as a substitute father and, moreover, by presenting fatherhood as the motive for his actions: he explains that after his release from captivity, he decided to search for the three siblings because he remembered "the kindness received from Filemone, who, as long as he lived, treated me like a son rather than like a servant."¹⁹

Manoli represents his actions as motivated by the gratitude he feels towards the man who treated him like a son; he manifests the patriarchal ideal of an unsurpassed filial bond: fatherhood is construed as a positive emotional principle that creates the conditions in which someone treated like a son owes a debt of gratitude to the paternal figure. As discussed in chapter three, a son's gratitude towards his mother could compete with the bond between

¹⁹ *A Happy Arrangement*, 339. "ricordevole de benefitii ricevuti da Filemone, che mi tenne sempre fin che ei visse, non da servo, ma da figliuolo." *Il commodo*, 163.

father and son. In *Il commodo*, however, Lesbia's mothering is presented as excessively emotional and impractical, and social harmony is reinstated only when Manoli functions as a paternal figure to the children of the man who treated him with paternal kindness.

3. Biological Motherhood

The second mother-figure in this play, Mona Cassandra, is the biological mother of Faustina and the wife of Messer Ricciardo. Leandro tells the marriage-broker, Travaglino, that, although he is in love with Faustina, he pretends to be infatuated with the mother so as not to burden the young girl.²⁰ Leandro suggests that the mother can plausibly be presented as an object of sexual desire and that he can thus deceive onlookers into believing that he is infatuated with her and not with her young daughter. He might also be suggesting that Cassandra's sexual appetite will lead her to believe that Leandro is indeed interested in her. In either case, Leandro views the mother through the prism of sexuality, a utilitarian sexuality that could potentially provide him with access to her daughter.

The ways in which the character of the mother is perceived in sexual terms are underscored further when Travaglino says that he believes he can broker a marriage between Leandro and Faustina because

I also have a foothold in the house, and if I can contrive to talk with the wife [Cassandra] while he [her husband, Messer Ricciardo] isn't there and can let her in on it, I know she will get things started and serve the cause joyfully. He [referring to Leandro] is a handsome young man, and

²⁰ "per non dare carico alla fanciulla." *Il commodo* (I), 88. One assumes that the "burden" is gossip, rumors, or anything else that might harm the reputation of a young girl.

ladies are very anxious for their daughters to have handsome husbands.²¹

Io ho anche tanta entrata in casa, che se io ho agio à parlare con la donna che egli [the husband, Messer Ricciardo] non vi sia e glene possa far' capace, so ch'ella pignerà, la pedona, e aiuterà la cosa gagliardamente, per ch'egli [Leandro] è un bel giovane e le donne hanno gran vaghezza che le lor' figliuole habbino begli mariti.²²

In Machiavelli's comedies, the mothers face a paradox: they can either care for the interests of their children or serve the interests of their husbands (as in *Clizia*); they can either become mothers or remain chaste wives (as in *Mandragola*). Cassandra, however, presents a more ambiguous case. Since Leandro puts on a show of desiring Cassandra, we might wonder what exactly the marriage-broker Travaglino means when he says that all mothers hope their daughters will have handsome husbands. Is he suggesting that mothers desire handsome husbands for their daughters to enjoy (as Sostrata desires for her daughter in *Mandragola*) or for themselves to enjoy? What is the operating principle here: maternal care or sexual desire? Is Cassandra represented first and foremost as a caring maternal figure or as a sexual female? In the Renaissance discourse on motherhood, nurturing and nourishing were commonly defined as maternal characteristics. But in *Il commodo*, these attributes are disassociated from the figure of the mother. When, for example, Travaglino offers Leandro some general advice concerning marriage, he says that one should always aspire to marry very

²¹ *A Happy Arrangement*, 245.

²² *Il commodo* (I), 89-90.

young women, right after they've been taken away from the nurse.²³ He clearly assumes that infants are not nourished by their mothers, but by hired wet nurses. Cassandra is characterized by being associated with sexuality, by being disassociated from nurturing, and by being depicted as a spiteful and disloyal wife. Travaglino tells Leandro he is certain she will joyfully support their cause (to marry Faustina to Leandro) because she is the kind of woman who will act against the wishes of her husband. He furthermore describes her as the kind of wife who breaches the privacy of the domestic space and risks her own and her husband's honor by secretly talking to strangers when her husband is away.

4. The Authority of Biological Fatherhood

Whether Cassandra is being spiteful or not, it is clear that she and Messer Ricciardo disagree on the question of their daughter's future husband. Cassandra favors Leandro, but Ricciardo repeats what the marriage broker Travaglino expressed earlier—that Cassandra's criterion is the young man's good looks. He also blames his wife for being fooled by the smooth talk of Travaglino and connects it to the general nature of women: "Oh, feminine sex, weak and frivolous, how easy it is for man to maneuver you as he pleases! In fact, anybody who knows how to talk well can influence women as he likes."²⁴

Ricciardo assumes that gender difference is at the bottom of the conflict between him and his wife. He also holds the conventional Renaissance notion that fathers and mothers have different responsibilities in regard to the marriage of their offspring: Ricciardo states that it is his responsibility to

²³ *Il commodo* (I), 88.

²⁴ *A Happy Arrangement*, 274. *Il commodo* (II), 109: "O sesso femminile, debole e leggieri [sic], quanto è facile à farvi rivolgere per ogni verso come l'huom vuole? In fine chi sa ben dire acconcia le donne come gli piace."

choose a husband for his daughter, and that Cassandra should stick to her domain, which is essentially to prepare Faustina's trousseau. Moreover, he clarifies that the choice of a son-in-law is not a negligible matter of preference—it reflects one's power and authority to decide on family strategy. Therefore, when Travaglino attempts to change Ricciardo's negative opinion of Leandro by suggesting that he consult with Cassandra, Ricciardo replies that, in the matter of choosing a husband for his daughter, he would rather take advice from his servants than from his wife. He perceives the disagreement with his wife as a gendered power struggle, as a question of who's on top: "You will tie my hands?," he asks his wife during an argument concerning their daughter's suitor, "you want to be more powerful than I?"²⁵

Time and again, Messer Ricciardo confirms that he understands the conjugal relationship as a competition for power. For example, he tells his neighbor, Lamberto, that he argued with his wife because she wanted to leave the house and he decided she would not leave. He goes on to say that "I want to have my way with her and to win out and to be the master and I don't intend to be run by a woman or for her to wear the pants."²⁶

²⁵ *A Happy Arrangement*, 275. *Il comodo* (II), 110: "Tu mi terrai le mani? Tu ne vorrai poter più di me?"

²⁶ *A Happy Arrangement*, 295. *Il comodo* (III), 121-22: "Io voglio [...] star di sopra, e tener la mestola [literally, ladle] in mano, e non intendo essere aggirato dalla Donna, e che ella porti le brache..." The fact that Ricciardo claims to have possession of the ladle can be understood in at least two ways. First, it can be seen as an ironic depiction of Ricciardo's claim to authority, since the ladle, after all, makes him look effeminate. However, the ladle metaphor might also portray him as a control freak and be understood as an assertion of absolute authority: all spheres are under his control, even, if he so wishes, the daily management of the household (a sphere traditionally left under the control of the wife).

Unlike the other elder male characters examined thus far, Messer Ricciardo is not an obvious object of ridicule: he is not avaricious; he does not make a fool of himself by falling in love with a young girl; he does not compete with a young man; he is not the target of a practical joke nor is he fooled by the interests and maneuverings of his wife. In fact, Ricciardo almost seems a textbook role-model of a husband as represented in Alberti's *I libri della famiglia* by the character Giannozzo, when he instructs the young bachelors of the extended Alberti family on how a husband should deal with his wife. Giannozzo says that his wife turned into the exemplum of housewifery mainly because he instructed her so well, because he corrected her whenever she made a mistake, because he established the home as her only legitimate domain, and because he did not neglect to supervise her.²⁷ Not unlike Giannozzo, Ricciardo instructs his wife on her duties, corrects her when he believes she neglects these duties,²⁸ supervises her actions diligently, and limits her freedom of movement to the home.

Ricciardo demonstrates a calculated, rational, and self-possessed attitude to marriage, especially when one compares him to his wife Cassandra: while Cassandra wants Leandro for a son-in-law because of the young man's looks and charms, Ricciardo underscores that marriage should not be taken lightly since it is not only a bond with an individual, but with a lineage.²⁹ In this, as in other respects, Messer Ricciardo lives up to the

²⁷ Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 78, 80, 86.

²⁸ For example, when Cassandra leaves their daughters under the care of servants, Ricciardo scolds her.

²⁹ In act two, he tells Travaglino that he does not wish to be like other fathers who choose husbands for their daughters solely out of a desire for riches and that, while Leandro might be rich, this is all he is. He wants his daughter to marry into a noble family.

Renaissance image of the responsible father, authoritative husband, and strong and virile man. Alberti's character Giannozzo articulates this ideal image when he says that wives are obedient only

if their husbands know how to be husbands [...] Never, at any moment, did I choose to show in word or action even the least bit of self-surrender in front of my wife. I did not imagine for a moment that I could hope to win obedience from one to whom I had confessed myself a slave. Always, therefore, I showed myself virile and a real man.³⁰

[...] quanto questi [the husbands] sanno essere mariti. [...] A me mai piacque in luogo alcuno né con parole né con gesto in quale minima parte si fusse sottomettermi alla donna mia; né sarebbe paruto a me potermi fare ubidire da quella a chi io avessi confessato me essere servo. Adunque sempre mi li monstri virile e uomo [...].³¹

There seems to be no basis for doubting the respectability and the virility of Ricciardo who, as he boasts to Lamberto, has even begotten ten children—and all the boys after his sixtieth birthday.

IV. *Il Commodo's Evaluation of Gender*

Il commodo examines masculinity, femininity, and power relations between the sexes in a complex manner: unlike the three other comedies we have examined thus far, the paternal figures in this play are strong, authoritative, resourceful, and they uphold conventional norms and rules of decorum. My analysis has concentrated mostly on the characters of Ricciardo

³⁰ Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 86-87.

³¹ *I libri della famiglia* (III), 213.

and Manoli, but there is a third respectable *vecchio* in the play—Ricciardo's neighbor, Lamberto. Although he is portrayed as the somewhat indulgent father of his only son Cammillo, he still exercises complete control over the decision-making process in regard to his son's marriage. Cammillo begrudges this, but, unlike the sons in *Clizia* and *La stiava*, he does not subvert his father's authority. In addition, the three paternal figures share similar values and goals: they agree on the authority and the dignity of fatherhood; they wish to marry off their children and agree on the (mostly non-material) criteria for choosing a spouse. The paternal figures respect, support, and assist each other and, overall, constitute a cohesive group of elders.

The maternal figures attempt to wield some power but are frustrated in their attempts: Cassandra's efforts to establish agency are prohibited by her authoritative husband, and the passivity and helplessness of Lesbia are presented as the outcome of the absence of a husband and by her low social status. The dominance of the husband is so strong that, when Cassandra disobeys Ricciardo and puts his honor at risk by letting Leandro into the house, he uses corporal punishment to such a degree that the servant Lucia runs out into the street crying that messer Ricciardo

[...] has taken hold of Mona and that he wants to cut her throat. He has pounded her all over and handled her roughly. If we don't get her out of his hands, the poor woman will never be good for anything anymore.³²

³² *A Happy Arrangement*, 324.

Messer ha preso Madonna e la vuole scannare, e halla tutta pesta e mal governa, e se non glie cavata delle mani, la poveretta non fia mai più buona à nulla.³³

Yet, *Il commodo* dramatizes on stage a reality in which even the most authoritative of husbands cannot control his wife, for, surprisingly, the plot of *Il commodo* constructs maternal figures that are in fact more of a threat to masculinity and male honor than the mothers we have examined thus far. As Ricciardo and the audience soon discover, keeping women enclosed and away from the public space can be just as dangerous as letting them roam the streets: when Messer Ricciardo forbids his wife to leave the house, she reluctantly obeys. But precisely because Cassandra is confined to the domestic space, she is in a better position to violate its privacy. Together with the servant, Lucia, she enables the infatuated Leandro to enter the house while Ricciardo is away. By opening the domestic space to a young, male stranger, Cassandra is not only guilty of disobeying her husband's orders to leave the marriage dealings to him, but she also endangers her husband's honor. Messer Ricciardo is aware of this, and when he learns of his wife's indiscretion, he exclaims: "Is this is the sort of thing that is going on inside the house? Is this what happens to my honor?"³⁴ The neighbor Lamberto confirms that Ricciardo's honor is in danger when he says that by taking Leandro as a son-in-law Ricciardo would put an end to the gossip and the dangers it entails.

In the world of *Il commodo*, women are responsible for the inappropriate crossing of boundaries not merely by inviting men into the private space of the house, as both Lesbia and Cassandra do, but also for

³³ *Il commodo* (V), 145.

³⁴ *A Happy Arrangement*, 324. *Il commodo* (V), 145-46: "Queste cose si fanno in casa? cosi v'è l'honor' mio?"

getting neighbors involved in what goes on inside the household. Because the servant Lucia calls for help and loudly informs outsiders of what is going on between the husband and wife, Lamberto and Demetrio intervene and try to pacify Ricciardo. The latter, however, tells the two men that this is family business, i.e., private business, and that because it involves his own honor, it is none of their concern.³⁵ Ricciardo's honor was damaged when his wife opened the house to a strange man—in other words, when he lost control of the boundary between the private space of his house and the outside, public space; when he lost control of the identity of those who cross the domestic threshold. Ricciardo also underscores that male autonomy derives from one's ability to guard the boundaries and maintain the privacy of the domestic space, and he insists that in his own house he has the power and authority to act however he wishes. Therefore, when Demetrio is concerned that the enraged Ricciardo will kill Leandro and asks to be allowed to come inside the house, Ricciardo tells Demetrio that "I don't want you to come, and I don't need you in my house."³⁶

While the fathers in *Mandragola*, *Clizia*, and *La stiava* do not demonstrate the kind of behavior and values that patriarchal ideology propagated, *Il commodo* constructs women who damage male honor and threaten masculinity even when the men around them act in accordance with patriarchal ideology. Cassandra and Lesbia, like ideally prescribed women, are restricted to the domestic space and can act only in that sphere. But their

³⁵ "My honor was harmed [...] You all attend to your own business." *A Happy Arrangement*, 325. *Il commodo* (V), 146: "Nell'honore sono stato tocco io [...] Attendete tutti à casi vostri."

³⁶ *A Happy Arrangement*, 325. *Il commodo* (V), 147: "Io non voglio che tu venga, e non ho bisogno di te in casa mia."

agency in the domestic sphere is also their source of power, since from within that sphere they dissolve the boundaries between the private and the public. These women in fact demonstrate that the domestic and the private spheres are not synonymous—their agency gives the domestic sphere a public resonance. Ultimately, those who appear to be the most powerless and dispossessed of any ability to affect reality are presented as the most dangerous to the social order.³⁷

The social networks that constituted Renaissance Florentine society, such as patronage, neighborhood loyalties, and family memberships, meant that in practice there was a continuous intertwining of the private and the public sphere. But even in the political reality of Florence of the 1530s and the 1540s, when the authority to govern rested exclusively with the Medici rulers, men's honor and masculinity drew upon an imagery that represented them as fathers who govern their own households and thereby hold the authority to act in the civic realm of male *virtù*.

³⁷ Jaime Goodrich illuminates beautifully this point when she examines the strategies that Margaret Roper, Thomas More's daughter, employed after her father's execution to make her domestic life public and political. See her "Thomas More and Margaret More Roper: A Case for Rethinking Women's Participation in the Early Modern Public Sphere," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 39:4 (2008), 1021-40.

Conclusion, Part II: The Performance of Maternal Roles and Patriarchal Masculinity

Part two has inquired into the ways in which female roles and attributes prescribed by the discourse of Renaissance humanists were reexamined in erudite comedy. Pamela Benson has demonstrated that between the fifteenth century and the 1530s the abundant humanist production of works on the education and nature of women and household management ultimately strove to keep women out of the public sphere and to prescribe a woman that suited male anxieties and needs.¹ In the prologue to *Il commodo*, Landi tells the audience that they

will recognize clearly the most common natures of old men, of young men, of masters, and of servants, of married ladies, and of young girls. You can verify these natures in your own houses any day.²

Landi represents his comedy as a verisimilitude of his audience's reality, in which, as in the humanistic treatises that Benson discusses, the conventional assumption about the inherent inferiority of women is not undermined, at least not explicitly. Ricciardo reiterates time and again the conventional misogynistic perceptions of women that one finds in Renaissance thought: he presents

¹ Pamela Joseph Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: the Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 2-3.

² Antonio Landi, *A Happy Arrangement*, 232. "Ma ben cognoscerete qual sia nei più la natura de' vecchi, et de' giovani, de' padroni, et de' servi, delle donne maritate, et delle donzelle: le quali nature potrete tutto giorno insieme nelle case vostre ricontrare." *Il commodo* (I), 71.

them as frivolous, mentally weak, easily manipulated, irrational, proud, and morally inferior.³

At the same time, conventional Renaissance assumptions about patriarchal power, authority, and masculinity are undermined in *La stiava* and *Il commodo*: in the former, the conditions for maintaining power within patriarchy—specifically, cooperative relationships among elders and fathers, as well as good relationships between fathers and sons—are far from ideal. Filippo and Nastagio, the fathers, cooperate with one another, but Nastagio immediately breaks this unity of the older generation and refuses to continue assisting Filippo when his wife expresses her displeasure. On the other hand, Alfonso and Ippolito, the sons, unite as brothers in order to undermine the plans of their fathers and Ippolito also wants to invite his brother-in-law to join their unit (in II:3). In addition, the intergenerational relationships in this play are dysfunctional: Filippo does not function as a paternal exemplum for his son, but rather gleefully competes with him and derives great pleasure when he succeeds in deceiving him.

In *Il commodo* assumptions about patriarchal power and authority are undermined by women who undermine men's authority and endanger their honor. The play thus suggests that, even when the men are strong fathers and husbands who manifest the patriarchal precepts of masculinity, women could potentially endanger their authority and honor. Indeed, Benson argues that we should not read the humanist treatises merely as doctrines that reconfirm existing gender assumptions, but rather as paradoxes: their dialogical discourse confirms at the same time that it challenges orthodox views about

³ For example, in act three, he tells his neighbor Lamberto that there is no way for him to get through to his wife by using learning or arguments drawn from the law, implying that she is irrational, emotional, and stupid.

women's biological, spiritual, and emotional inferiority. One of the ways in which conventional gender assumptions were challenged in these works was by transforming female attributes commonly perceived as dangerous into assets. Women were thus represented as strong not in spite of their reproductive function, but rather because of it; their feminine, i.e., nurturing, virtues were praised as socially beneficial and as the qualities that endow them with the ability to govern.⁴

My analysis of the complex perceptions of gender in *Il commodo* and *La stiava* complements Benson's argument. In the humanist works we have examined, women's assumed indiscretion, their taste for gossip, and their reluctance to observe the boundaries between private and public are presented as serious liabilities. For example, in book three of Alberti's *I libri della famiglia*, Giannozzo warns his young listeners not to trust their wives to keep a secret and suggests that husbands hide from them the account books and other family records of importance. In book two of *De re uxoria*, Francesco Barbaro prescribes the ideal wife as silent inside and outside the home and compares a woman who speaks in public to one who exposes a naked arm. The ideal woman that these conduct books prescribe is silent and invisible.⁵

⁴ The second way that Benson notes is claiming that exemplary women—able women who could govern—had masculine virtues. *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, 4.

⁵ Virginia Cox qualifies this assertion by making a clear distinction between the fifteenth-century humanists who worked in republics and those who worked in princely courts. She claims that, while Italian humanists such as Boccaccio, Barbaro, and Bruni were hostile and mocking towards the public speech of women, court humanists, such as Ercole de' Roberti praised female eloquence. See her "Gender and Eloquence in Ercole de' Roberti's *Portia and Brutus*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 62 (2009), 61-101. Anthony F. D'Elia makes a similar claim concerning the wedding orations that the fifteenth-century humanists Guarino Guarini, Ludovico Carbone, and Francesco Filelfo delivered in the courts of Ferrara, Naples, and Milan. See his "Marriage,

The ability to control women's talk was perceived as especially important when social interactions were driven by the desire, among other things, to guard one's secrets while discovering as much as possible of other people's secrets.⁶ In both plays, the mothers manifest indiscretion and fail to preserve the boundaries of the private sphere: Giovanna, Cecchi's character, by loudly complaining about private matters in public and, as her son remarks, by continuously causing scandals in front of the neighbors; Cassandra, Landi's character, by staying inside the house only to invite a young man to come inside; Lesbia, the "milk-mother," by unknowingly letting a stranger disguised as her master enter the house.⁷ However, these conventional female faults ultimately turn out to be socially beneficial, since in both plays a failure to separate the private from the public enables the recovery of lost offspring, the discovery of true identities, and the arrangement of marriages. The very same "typical" female weaknesses reconfirm normative social institutions and strengthen the social networks of the dominant culture. One of the most significant elements in Duke Cosimo's governance of Florence was that the identity of the state and the identity of the ruler became one and the same. Cosimo turned the state into a projection of his subjectivity, and although *Il commodo* was commissioned at an early stage of Cosimo's reign, one still wonders whether it was consciously meant to promote the notion that

Sexual Pleasure, and Learned Brides in the Wedding Orations of Fifteenth-Century Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 55:2 (2002), 379-433.

⁶ Ronald F.E. Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 31.

⁷ She acknowledges to her husband the implications of what she has done: "One should always go slowly in opening the door. I, too, know well what scandals can come from opening up right away." *A Happy Arrangement*, 335. "Sempre si vorrebbe andare adagio all'aprire la porta. Io sò bene anch'io che scandoli nascono spesso per tirar la corda al primo." *Il commodo* (V), 157.

eliminating the boundaries between the private and the public sphere can often prove socially beneficial.

Landi's *Il comodo* and Cecchi's *La stiava* reexamine their culture's perceptions of female virtue and renegotiate the value and meaning of established gender roles. But while the plays problematize these issues, they do not offer a monolithic and fixed view on the questions they raise: at the same time that the women's actions enable the resolutions at the end of the plays, they are also presented as dangerously uncontrollable. The male characters in both plays fear that their domestic life will become a public affair in the hands of their women, and they bemoan the dangers of scandals and gossip.

Ultimately, these plays provide an open-ended discourse on female and maternal roles, and, while they reproduce their society's ideological assumptions about gender, they also implicitly criticize these assumptions. *Il comodo* was commissioned to celebrate the marriage of the young, new ruler of Florence and, together with other cultural products during the festivities, it participated in duke Cosimo's performance of power. Yet while the play promoted and reaffirmed the existing power structure, it also exposed the weaknesses of a hierarchy based on gender and age: even though the men are manly and upright, even though women are successfully confined to the domestic space, and even though sons do not outwit their fathers, male power and honor are still subverted by the powerless members of the family.

The fear of the powerless, disenfranchised elements of society runs deep in Florentine culture. For example, in a story that dominated the collective memory of Florentines—the murder of Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti—the cause of the thirteenth-century conflict between the

political factions of the Ghibellines and the Guelfs was an alliance between the disenfranchised. Not unlike what happens in *Il commodo*, the story of Buondelmonte betrays anxieties concerning the disruptive effects of an alliance between older married women and young men. According to the earliest surviving description of the event found in a chronicle from the 1280s,⁸ after the young Buondelmonte publicly insulted Oddo Arrighi, he was required to marry Oddo's niece to resolve the conflict. After the marriage negotiations were concluded, Gualdrada, a married woman from another elite family (the Donati) challenged the young man not to follow the orders of the elder members of his clan and suggested that he marry her own daughter instead. Buondelmonte agreed, and as a result his clan and Oddo Arrighi's clan (joined by other elite families, such as the Uberti) enters into a vendetta that led to decades-long factional strife. There is no way to determine the accuracy of the story, but the significant point is that Florentines ascribed the mythic origins of their city's civic unrest to female conniving and the disobedience of youth.

Il commodo and *La stiava* do not offer a unified perception of marriage. In *La stiava* there is not much discussion of the general nature of marriage. Unlike the majority of erudite comedies, the one marriage it mentions does not appear at the end, but before the events of the play take place. Marriages in erudite comedies generally constitute the happy ending and function as a mode of conflict resolution. But in *La stiava* the dramatic conflict derives in part from the marriage the son has entered into without his father's knowledge. In this play, marriage does not serve patriarchal interests, but rather undermines paternal authority. In addition, marriage does not function as the solution to a

⁸ *Cronica fiorentina compilata nel secolo XIII*, in *Testi fiorentini del Dugento e dei primi del Trecento*, ed. A. Schiaffini (Florence, 1954), 82-150 (117-19).

conflict, but as the exacerbation of a problem: Alfonso opens the play by noting that marrying Adelfia did not resolve his problems, but made them worse because he is even more jealous and possessive of Adelfia now that she is his wife.

In *Il commodo*, marriage appears at the end of the plot as a means of restoring social harmony and protecting paternal interests and male honor. But, surprisingly enough, within this socially conventional framework the moral grounds of marriage and the ways in which women are used in it are questioned. For example, when the marriage broker tells Lesbia he wishes to speak with her master, the nurse wants to ask him whether he wants to discuss the business of Porfira's matrimony. Instead, though, she asks: "What do you want with him? To talk about some patrimony?"⁹ As it turns out, Lesbia's confusion between the two terms is not random: matrimony, she clarifies, is not unlike patrimony in that it is business done by men for the benefit of men. "The poor girls," she says, "have to take what is given to them and must manage the best they can."¹⁰

We might expect a female character to articulate a critique of marriage, but the institution of marriage is even further problematized when the most patriarchal character in the play, Messer Ricciardo, questions the ways in which girls are construed as commercial objects: when the marriage broker suggests that the father decide as soon as possible on his daughter's husband because her worth will go down as time passes (and she gets older), the

⁹ *A Happy Arrangement*, 237. *Il commodo* (I), 79: "Che vorrete voi da lui? ragionargli forse di qualche patrimonio?" And Travaglino responds: "Tu vuoi dir matrimonio."

¹⁰ *A Happy Arrangement*, 237. *Il commodo* (I), 80: "Le povere fanciulle [...] bisogna che le tolghino quello che è lor'dato et visi arrechino per quel verso che elle possono."

father replies that “Money is fine and good, as you say, but the flesh of my daughter is also dear to me and not to be thrown away. I don’t want to hurry too much; maybe you think this is a bean [in the original, a fennel] sale.”¹¹ Moreover, Ricciardo perceives marriage as more than an institution that connects lineages and establishes social networks. He joins his neighbor, Lamberto, in claiming that wives are the cause of many pains and aches, but he also says that by avoiding having a wife “you don’t have the consolation that I have [...]; you don’t have anybody to embrace you and to warm you up when it’s cold.”¹² Even Lamberto preaches to his son that there is more to choosing a wife than assessing material benefits.¹³

In *La stiava* women are constructed within marriage as transferable objects of possession—the girl is a slave, literally a possession. But *Il commodo* articulates a different perception: Brian Richardson argues that in humanist advice books and treatises composed before the 1530s love was not perceived as an integral and necessary part of marriage. However, from the 1540s onwards, one can note an evolving perception of marriage: although it continued to place the interests of the lineage above those of the individual, and although women were enclosed within their homes and expected to serve passively the interests of their husbands, conjugal love was beginning to be perceived as more important than wealth. Richardson provides two reasons for this change. First, after the Council of Trent reaffirmed in 1547 the doctrine

¹¹ *A Happy Arrangement*, 271. *Il commodo* (II), 105: “E danari son begli et buoni come tu dì, ma anchora le carni della mia figliuolina son’ da tenere care et da non le gittar’ via, et non vo’ correre in chintana, questo ti par’ forse un mercato di finocchi.”

¹² *A Happy Arrangement*, 312. *Il commodo* (IV), 136: “Tu dì il vero, ma tu non hai anche quelle consolationi che ho io, et non hai chi t’abbracci et ti riscaldi quando egli è freddo.”

¹³ *Il commodo* (III), 116-17.

that marriage was a sacrament, more prominence was given to the personal, physical, and spiritual intimacy between the husband and wife. But in addition to the Counter-Reformation, the change reflected men's desire to re-organize women's lives around patriarchal interests. Putting love at the center of the ideal marriage made the husband and his interests even more central in a woman's existence. Marriage thus became not only a socially practical matter, but a personal, emotional fulfillment.¹⁴

By no means does *Il commodo* offer a sentimental approach to marriage, but it does offer a nuanced one: Lesbia critiques the institution and the status of women within it at the same time that she laments the absence of her own husband and declares how much better her life would be with him by her side. And the character of Ricciardo suggests that old men, and not only women and youth, could conceive of marriage as more than a mere exchange of valuables. Since *Il commodo* was performed during the high-profile wedding of Florence's ruler, the complex image of marriage that it offers must have addressed the needs of the occasion and, since it presents marriage as more than a mere practical affair or a business transaction, it must have satisfied the egos of the most important members of the audience—duke Cosimo and his bride Eleonora.

¹⁴ Brian Richardson, "'Amore maritale': Advice on Love and Marriage in the Second Half of the Cinquecento," in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza (Oxford: European Humanities Research Center, 2000), 195-98.

Part III

Chapter Six: The Regrets of Fathers—Surrogacy and the Dysfunction of Fatherhood in Ludovico Ariosto's *I suppositi* (1509)

I. The Author and his Milieu

This last chapter of the dissertation circles around to return to the beginning—the beginning of the genre of “erudite comedy” as well as the beginning of my project. In the introduction, I discussed briefly a scene from Ludovico Ariosto's *I suppositi*, and it is now time to examine the play more closely. In studies of Renaissance drama, Ariosto (1474-1533) is credited with being the father of Renaissance erudite comedy. This designation is more than a perception of modern scholars: Ariosto's contemporaries were also conscious of the fact that he created something new and unique. In a letter to Isabella d'Este in Mantua, the courtier and humanist Bernardino Prosperi described the performance of “an entirely modern comedy, all delightful and full of moralities and words and deeds that raised great laughter.”¹ The comedy was Ariosto's *I suppositi*, and Prosperi clearly recognized that he and the rest of the audience had witnessed something modern and novel.

Yet much of the literature on Ariosto's works tends to neglect his plays in favor of what is considered his masterpiece, the *Orlando furioso*.² Works on

¹ Letter quoted in Michele Catalano, *Vita di Ludovico Ariosto*, vol. II (Geneva: Olschki, 1930), 87. The translation of Prosperi's description is by Edmund Garratt Gardner in *The King of Court Poets: a Study of the Work, Life and Time of Lodovico Ariosto* (1906; reprint ed. Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), 325.

² For an extremely negative evaluation of *I suppositi*, to the extent of defining it as childish and boring, see G. Marpillero, “I ‘Suppositi’ di Ludovico Ariosto,” *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 31 (1898), 291-310.

Ariosto's theatre in English are especially sparse:³ scholars began to show an increasing interest in Ariosto's dramatic production only from the 1950s onwards,⁴ but in much of the literature that predates the mid-1980s Ariosto's plays are discussed in reductive terms, most often focused on the question of the extent to which Ariosto relied on, and borrowed from, the Latin models of Plautus and Terence and other literary genres.⁵

It is quite probable that the tenor of these discussions derives from Francesco De Sanctis' prominent influence in the field of Italian literature. In his foundational work, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870-71) he dismisses Ariosto's plays as mere imitations of the Latin models.⁶ In the last two

³ A few works that offer a general survey of Italian Renaissance theatre devote some space to Ariosto's plays: for example, Marvin T. Herrick, *Italian Comedy in the Renaissance* (1960; reprint ed. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970) and Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, *The Birth of Modern Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969). Significant discussions of Ariosto's theatre include the introduction to *The Comedies of Ariosto*, trans. and eds. Edmond M. Beame and Leonard G. Sbrocchi (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975); the introduction by Donald Beecher to *Ludovico Ariosto: Supposes (I suppositi) (1509)*, trans. George Gascoigne (1566), eds. Donald A. Beecher and John Butler (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1999); Jennifer Lorch, "Introduction to Ariosto's *The Supposes*," in *Three Italian Renaissance Comedies*, ed. Christopher Cairns (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 3-55; Sergio Costola, "Ludovico Ariosto's Theatrical Machine: Tactics of Subversion in the 1509 Performance of *I suppositi*" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, 2002).

⁴ See, for example, Ireneo Sanesi, *La commedia* (Milan: Vallardi, 1954); Giuseppe Toffanin, *La vita e le opere di Ludovico Ariosto* (Naples: Libreria Scientifica Editrice, 1959); Natalino Sapegno, *Compendio di storia della letteratura italiana* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1963).

⁵ See, for example, Emilio Goggio, "Dramatic Theories in the Prologues to the *Commedie Erudite* of the Sixteenth Century," *PMLA* 58: 2 (Jun., 1943), 322-36; Leicester Bradner, "The Rise of Secular Drama in the Renaissance," *Studies in the Renaissance* 3 (1956), 7-22; Karl F. Thompson, "A note on Ariosto's *I suppositi*," *Comparative Literature* 12 (Winter, 1960), 42-46.

⁶ Francesco De Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature*, vol. II, trans. Joan Redfern (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 473-79.

decades, however, along with a general rise of academic interest in Italian Renaissance theatre, scholars have begun to reexamine Ariosto's comedies in different terms so that questions of origins and influence no longer set the tone. The academic discourse on Ariosto's plays now derives from the terms and issues believed to be set by the author himself.⁷

II. The Play

1. The Historical Context

I suppositi (1509) is the second prose-comedy in the vernacular that Ariosto wrote and staged for the court of Ferrara (the first was *La cassaria*, which was presented before the court the previous year).⁸ The play was extremely popular in Italy, and its fame ensured that it influenced dramatic production in other regions of Europe.⁹ It was performed for the first time on the 6th of February 1509 during the Carnival festivities in Ferrara in a temporary theatre built inside the Great Hall of the Ducal Palace.¹⁰ Albert Ascoli has argued that the political setting in Ferrara and in the Italian peninsula overall influenced the artistic production of Ariosto, and especially his early comedies which he composed when Italy was plagued by numerous

⁷ Riccardo Scrivano discusses this theoretical shift in his "Towards a 'Philosophy' of Renaissance Theatre," *Comparative Critical Approaches to Renaissance Comedy*, eds. Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1986), 10-11, 90.

⁸ For the history of *I suppositi*'s manuscript and printed editions, see E.C. Forman, "The Manuscripts of Ariosto's Comedies and their Relation to the Printed Editions," *Modern Language Notes* 32:5 (May, 1917), 257-67.

⁹ For example, Donald A. Beecher discusses the influence Ariosto had in England. See his "Introduction" in *Ludovico Ariosto: Supposes*, 11-87.

¹⁰ Costola, "Ludovico Ariosto's Theatrical Machine," 15.

wars in the early sixteenth century.¹¹ The domestic affairs of Ferrara were also in turmoil: the members of the ruling family, the Este, were divided among themselves, and the friction and conflict led to public displays of violence and revenge.¹²

¹¹ Albert Russell Ascoli, "Ariosto and the 'Fier Pastor': Form and History in *Orlando Furioso*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54:2 (Summer, 2001), 487-522. In 1509, the year in which Ariosto composed *I suppositi*, Ferrara joined the War of the League of Cambrai that Pope Julius II had been waging against Venice since 1508. Julius wanted to reestablish papal control over the Romagna (the cities that had been conquered by Cesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI, came under the influence of Venice once Alexander and Cesare were dead), and on 10 December 1508, the papacy, France, the Holy Roman Empire, and Ferdinand I of Spain concluded the League of Cambrai against Venice. Alfonso d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, joined the League as Julius's appointed *gonfaloniere della Chiesa* and in April 1509 he helped Julius seize Ravenna (and took the Polesine for himself). For a description of these events, see John Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 390-402. See also Thomas Brian Deutscher, "Ippolito (I) d'Este," in *Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*, eds. Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas B. Deutscher, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 445-46. Linda Carroll discusses the ways in which artists at the court of Ferrara dealt with the crisis in their works. See her "Fools of the Dukes of Ferrara: Dosso, Ruzante, and Changing Este Alliances," *MLN* 118:1 (Jan., 2003), 60-84. For the war in 1509 and its effect on the political affairs of Ferrara, see Ernesto Sestan, "Gli Estensi e il loro stato al tempo dell'Ariosto," *Rassegna della letteratura Italiana* 89 (1975), 19-33.

¹² In 1509 Cardinal Ippolito, Duke Alfonso's brother, ordered his men to gouge out the eyes of his half brother, Giulio d'Este. Ippolito was infatuated with Angela Borgia, Giulio's mistress, and the jealous cardinal apparently thought it was a good idea to destroy the eyes that Angela reportedly liked so much. Giulio lost one eye and his face was disfigured for the rest of his life. The following year, Giulio, attempting to take revenge for the injury, and another brother, Ferrante d'Este, desiring to take over Alfonso's position as duke of Ferrara, led a coup against their half brothers. The coup failed and the two men were locked in windowless cells for eighteen years. Ferrante died in his cell, while Giulio was moved into a furnished apartment and remained incarcerated there for 53 years. On this event and other acts of brutality among the Este family at the beginning of the sixteenth century, see Luciano Chiappini, *Gli Estensi. Mille anni di storia* (Ferrara: Corbo Editore, 2001), 235-42.

The tense and violent context in which *I suppositi* was composed and performed is especially relevant because the construction of masculinity and femininity—the focal points of my analysis—is tightly tied with the issues that the Este faced during the crisis, issues of power, military virility, and the authority to govern. Moreover, Ariosto himself made the context relevant when he chose to situate the play in his own time and place—in Ferrara of the year 1500.

2. The Plot

The play revolves around the love escapades of a young Sicilian named Erostrato. This youth is sent to Ferrara to study at its famous university, but almost immediately after his arrival he sees the beautiful daughter of Damone, Polinesta, and falls in love with her. Erostrato's companion and servant, Dulippo, tries to help his master secure a marriage to Polinesta, and, being of the same age, they exchange their identities: Dulippo assumes the identity of his master, attends lectures at the university, and begins to negotiate with Damone for a marriage between his daughter and himself, the surrogate Erostrato. The real Erostrato assumes Dulippo's identity, gains access to Damone's house as a servant and successfully seduces Polinesta. In his guise as Erostrato, Dulippo competes for Polinesta with another man—Damone's old neighbor Cleandro, who is a respected doctor of law. Dulippo and Erostrato, however, lose control over the situation when Erostrato's father, Filogono, arrives in Ferrara in search of his son. Only when Cleandro realizes that Dulippo is in fact his long lost son does the play reach a resolution: everyone's true identity is revealed, and Erostrato and Polinesta receive their fathers' blessing and are allowed to marry.

3. "Suppositi" and its variants as a social critique

As this plot summary makes clear, the substitution of one character for another is a central device in the play. Indeed, one meaning of the term *supposito* refers to individuals substituting for, and assuming the identity of, other people. The term holds additional meanings: the refusal to conform to conventions and norms or to submit to authority; and its verb form means to suppose or conjecture.¹³ Ariosto plays with all of these various, and sometimes conflicting, meanings. The characters in *I suppositi* assume the identity of others; they wrongly assume they know who is who and what is what; individuals seem to submit to authority and yet refuse to follow societal norms and procedures.

Most significant, however, are the ways in which Ariosto employs the term to refer to sodomy. Beame and Sbrocchi have noted that the Latin term *suppositus* translates in Italian also to *posposto*, i.e., placed behind or after.¹⁴ In addition, Costola has noted that in the prologue, when Ariosto tells the audience that in the past children have been substituted for one another, he uses the term “per l’adietro” which means not only “in the past,” but also “from behind.”¹⁵ The allusion to sodomy is emphasized even further when Ariosto tells his audience that he does not use the term in the same way it was used in the past by Elefantide and the Sophists.¹⁶ The reference to the Sophists

¹³ “Supposito,” in *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, vol. 20, eds. Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti and Salvatore Battaglia (Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 2000), 563-64.

¹⁴ Beame and Sbrocchi, *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 95-96.

¹⁵ Costola, “Ludovico Ariosto’s Theatrical Machine,” 175-77.

¹⁶ “Non pigliate, benigni auditori, questo supponere in male parte: chè bene in altra guisa si suppone che non lasciò ne li suoi lascivi libri Elefantide figurato; et in altri ancora che non s’hanno li contenziosi dialettici imaginato.” *I suppositi*, Prologue. I use the prose version in the edition by Giovanni Tortoli, *Commedie e satire di Lodovico Ariosto* (Florence: Barbèra, Bianchi e comp., 1856). “Don’t take these substitutions in a bad sense, my good audience, for

points to the philosophical use of the verb *supponere*, and Elephantis was a Greek poetess renowned during Ariosto's time for depicting sodomy in her works.¹⁷

From the very beginning of *I suppositi* sodomy and the related issues of gender and power relations are conjured up. The "supposizioni" serve to remind the audience that identities are not natural, but rather assumed by, and projected on, individuals. The reference of "suppositi" to sodomy and to what might be approaching "per l'adietro" suggests that the audience should guard its back and beware not to be taken by surprise from behind. In this fashion, the prologue implicitly presents the play as a warning against, and a critique of, the gendered order of the Ferraran court.

The sitting arrangements during the performance in the Great Hall of the ducal palace no doubt added an ironic layer of social commentary. The duke sat at the very front of the theatre with his back to the audience and with his court and subjects behind him, in the order of their respective class stratification. While this spatial architecture symbolized the duke's superiority as the head of the social hierarchy, we should also note that, considering the prologue's implicit allusions to sodomy, an arrangement in which the duke shows his behind to the audience also subverts his position from one of power

they are not like substitutions illustrated in the lascivious books of Elephantis, or those others imagined by Sophists in their contentious dialectics." *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 53.

¹⁷ Costola does not note, however, that the elite classes during the Renaissance (borrowing from the Romans) associated Greek high culture with homosexuality. Thus by conjoining the Sophists and Elephantis, it is quite possible that Ariosto did not allude to two different meanings of the term "suppositi," i.e., the analytical supposition and the sexual act of sodomy, but rather made the latter meaning even more dominant in the minds of the audience.

and dominance into one of weakness and submissiveness.¹⁸ One should wonder, however, if this sitting arrangement could not also be understood as the duke's assertion of confidence in his own power, as an explicit statement that he is unafraid to sit with his back to his court and be observed, instead of observing others. The duke becomes an object of his court's gaze—he is his court's (and by extension his city's) object of desire. Objectification could imply more than weakness and lack of agency—it can also signify the measure of one's importance.¹⁹

4. The paradox of authority

The prologue to *I suppositi* problematizes the theme of authority: its clever use of the term “suppositi” within the physical context of the performance hall suggests the difficulty of deciding whether one has authority or whether one's authority has been subverted. *I suppositi* presents a paradoxical perception of authority according to which there is no “either-or”: no fixed reference point from which one can be judged as having authority or not, no fixed relationship between signifier and signified. Hence, the duke can be both “the head” and “the behind,” both a subject with agency and an object of desire.²⁰

¹⁸ Costola, “Ludovico Ariosto's Theatrical Machine,” 113-15, 122.

¹⁹ With the duke's back to the audience, his courtiers could observe his every move without the risk of being noticed. By carefully observing their duke, they could receive cues on how to respond to the performance. Also, with the duke sitting directly in front of the stage, the actors must have seemed to be performing for him alone (and could more easily be attuned to his responses to, and reception of, the play).

²⁰ On the ways in which Ariosto bases his comedy on misunderstandings and contradictory readings of words, e.g., “suppositi,” see Siro Ferrone, “Sulle commedie in prosa dell'Ariosto,” *Ludovico Ariosto: lingua, stile e tradizione*, ed. Cesare Segre (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976), 411-16.

The central significance of the issue of authority for an understanding of the play is emphasized even more when the prologue extends the discussion into the question of authorship. The speaker (who was Ariosto himself in the 1509 performance) defends the play against the possible accusation that it lacks originality because it is modeled after the Latin plays of Terence and Plautus. While admitting that he borrowed material from these two playwrights, the speaker also claims that they in turn borrowed their material from the Greek comedies of Menander, Apollodorus, and others. He goes on to say that

Whether or not the author should be condemned for this he leaves to your discretion; but he asks you not to pass judgment before you have heard the new story in its entirety, a story that unfolds part by part.²¹

Se per questo è da esser condannato, o no, al discretissimo giudizio vostro se ne rimette; il quale vi prega bene non facciate, prima che tutta abbiate la nuova favola conosciuta, la quale di parte in parte per sè medesima si dichiara. (prologo)

In this new story, the speaker says, there are many “suppositi” that members of the audience have encountered before. Even in our own times, he says, children have been switched and their identities mistaken for someone else’s. But “to have young men substituted for old men must certainly seem new and strange to you.”²² This statement is surprising since, although among the many role-exchanges and assumed identities in the play nowhere does a youngster actually assume the identity of an old man, the use of the

²¹ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 53.

²² Ibid. “Ma che li vecchi sieno da li giovani suppositi, vi debbe per certo parere e novo e strano.”

subjunctive mood (“sieno”) alludes to the possibility of such an exchange in identity.

This last “supposito” might perhaps be interpreted within Ariosto’s discussion of authority and authorship, since he argues in the prologue for his authority as an author. He acknowledges the progenitors of his creation (Plautus and Terence) at the same time that he claims to be original, to be the creator of something new. This new thing, as we have seen, is that last “supposito” that stages young people who assume the position of the old. In this fashion, Ariosto creates a striking contrast between his own claim for authorship and his new “supposito” which is the absence of paternal authority in the world he creates. I have fathers (the Romans), the author says, and they have had fathers too (the Greeks). But the process of authorship and creation did not stop with the Greeks and the Romans—I too am a creator and a progenitor. I assume the identity of the old, I assume the power to author from my literary progenitors.

The following pages examine the relationships between three fathers and their children. There are no mothers in the play, a fact that helps to emphasize the deficiencies of the fathers even further since, in contrast to the four other plays we have examined, the lack of authoritative paternal figures cannot be explained by (and blamed on) a mother who tries to undermine her husband’s authority.

III. Fathers and Sons

1. Filogono and Erostrato

The first relationship between a father and his child to be examined is that between Filogono and Erostrato. Filogono appears on stage only in IV:3,

but the audience has been introduced to his son Erostrato at a much earlier stage. In the first scene of the first act, Polinesta tells her wet-nurse that Dulippo, her father's servant, is in fact Erostrato, a Sicilian from a respectable and rich family who exchanged his identity with that of his servant, the real Dulippo. Erostrato did so, the young woman explains, because when he arrived in Ferrara to become a student

he immediately fell in love with me, and his love was so vehement that he suddenly changed his mind and cast aside his books and his long gown and determined that I alone would be the subject of his study.²³

subito si innamorò di me; e di tale veemenzia fu questo amor suo, che in un tratto mutò consiglio, e gittò da parte e libri e panni lunghi, e deliberossi che io sola el suo studio fussi. (I:1)

This depiction of Erostrato renders the sense of an impulsive, whimsical young man: "subito" and "in un tratto" convey the irrational and uncalculating way in which he lets his feelings rule his actions while "gittò da parte" colors his actions with unnecessary dramatic gestures. Erostrato is very much still an adolescent who gives no thought to the implications of his actions and has no ability to control his passions.

Why does a young man from a respectable and rich family feel it necessary to approach the object of his love with such deceiving tactics instead of openly approaching Damone, Polinesta's father, to ask for her hand? Why does he not contact his father and ask him to negotiate a marriage with Polinesta? Erostrato never gives the impression that his interest in Polinesta is solely sexual (unlike Callimaco, the young lover in Machiavelli's

²³ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 55.

Mandragola, who was not aiming for marriage but for a sexual affair), and there are certainly no class barriers that might impede this betrothal. The exchange of identities functions, of course, as a tool for comic complications and misunderstandings. Yet at the same time, it serves to describe the character of Erostrato, whose decision to exchange his identity with his servant and enter stealthily into Damone's house seems irrational and inexplicable. Together with Polinesta's characterization of him, Erostrato appears as an irresponsible adolescent enjoying a boyish prank.

Indeed, Polinesta's depiction seems to be right on mark: while Erostrato exhibits autonomous agency in his determination to pursue his love instead of the studies his father chose for him, he goes about it in a reckless way. It is he who conceives the initial plan to switch roles with his servant, but soon enough he becomes hopelessly dependent on him for its execution. For example, when Erostrato's plans take a turn for the worse because Damone is inclined to marry Polinesta to his neighbor Cleandro (who forgoes the dowry and instead offers two thousand ducats as a wedding present), Erostrato relies on Dulippo to come up with a solution. In the dialogue between Dulippo and Erostrato, the latter's childish behavior is most apparent.

First, Erostrato quickly despairs when he learns the news about Cleandro's offer. Dulippo is forced to tell him: "Don't jump to conclusions before you hear the rest of the story."²⁴ With these words Dulippo alludes to Erostrato's tendency to reach conclusions or delude himself that he has understood the situation before he knows all the facts. But Erostrato's immaturity and lack of perception become even clearer as the dialogue

²⁴ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 61. "Non volere intendere tu, prima ch' io abbia dato al mio ragionamento fine." (II:1)

proceeds. Dulippo tells the desperate Erostrato that in his guise as Erostrato he offered the same amount of money to Damone. Erostrato is immediately excited and Dulippo has no choice but to slowly clarify the difficulty of this solution:

[The fake] Erostrato: How can I, posing as the son of Filogono, undertake such an obligation without his authority and consent?

[The fake] Dulippo: You've studied more than I have.²⁵

Dulippo has to remind Erostrato of his lack of social and economic independence; he has to remind him that authority lies with his father, not with him. Erostrato's reply acknowledges the greater wisdom that his servant possesses. In fact, although the two are peers in age, and although Erostrato is the master and Dulippo his servant, Dulippo has the maturity and wisdom that, not unlike a father, enables him to explain to Erostrato the binding social rules of the grown-up world.

Dulippo's role as a surrogate paternal figure is underscored once more in this same dialogue. He explains to Erostrato that he intends to solve the conundrum they face (not having a father to negotiate the marriage and offer money to Damone) by using a chance encounter with a Sieneese traveler to their benefit. But before he is able to explain the details (having the Sieneese pose as Filogono and thus giving Erostrato a father who can negotiate the marriage with Damone), Erostrato demonstrates his impatience and inability to look ahead and perceive the potential implications of the situation. He jumps into Dulippo's words, saying: "It could be that this [Dulippo's encounter with the Sieneese traveler] concerns me; but I still don't make head or tail of it." Dulippo

²⁵ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 62. "Erostrato: E come posso io, fingendomi figliolo di Filogono, senza auctoritade e consenso di quello, obligarmi a tal cose? Dulippo: Tu hai piu di me studiato." (II:1)

once more needs to reprimand Erostrato as if he were a little boy, and not his social superior: "Oh, how impatient you are! But let me continue."²⁶

Erostrato's impulsivity and lack of control are most evident in II:3. Dulippo has shrewdly struck a deal with Pasifilo, the parasite, to work as a double agent and inform him of Cleandro's plans concerning Polinesta. Although he has informed Erostrato of this deal and received his approval for it, nonetheless, when Erostrato, playing the role of Dulippo, Damone's servant, sees Cleandro approaching him on the street, he cannot resist the temptation to torment his rival somewhat. He tells Cleandro that Pasifilo, who pretends to be Cleandro's advocate in the marriage negotiations, is in fact slandering him. It is unclear what Erostrato hopes to gain by this, besides the irritation of his rival, and with one stroke he has destroyed Dulippo's shrewd plan of gaining inside information. Cleandro loses all trust in Pasifilo and Dulippo and Erostrato will therefore not get any inside knowledge of the marriage negotiations between Cleandro and Damone. It seems that, once more, Erostrato fails to understand the implications of his actions and allows an impulse to control his behavior.

This then is the characterization of Erostrato. In the social context of sixteenth-century Italy, however, he deserves neither praise nor censure. Erostrato acts his age (while Dulippo does not), and the members of *l' suppositi's* audience might reasonably expect him as an adolescent to demonstrate immaturity, impulsivity, and the inability to make long term plans or perceive the full implications of his actions. After all, if adolescents possessed all of these qualities, what justification would there be for a

²⁶ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 63. "Può essere che questa cosa appartenga a me; ma non vi trovo capo né via, perché io lo debba credere." "O come sei impaziente! Ma lasciarmi dire." (II:1)

hierarchical patriarchal society? It is the father, as Dulippo reminds Erostrato (II:1), who holds the authority. Fathers should display all of the above qualities to their adolescent, dependent sons. But what kind of father is Filogono?

Filogono, Erostrato's father, comes to Ferrara in search of his son after several Sicilian travelers, who call on Erostrato at home, never manage to see him. In Filogono's first appearance on stage, he agrees with a local Ferraran that no love equals a father's love. After hearing about the hardships that Filogono faced in his trip, the Ferraran asks Filogono:

why you didn't make your son, who's young, come to see you instead of going through so much trouble to come here, for, as you say, you have no other business to attend to? Was it perhaps because you were more concerned about distracting him from his studies than about placing your life in danger?²⁷

Ma non so perchè più presto non hai fatto a te lui giovane ritornare, che tu pigliarti di venire qui fatica, non avendoci, come tu dici, altra faccenda. Hai forse più rispetto avuto di non sviarlo dallo studio, che te medesimo porre al pericolo de la vita? (IV:3)

Indeed, it might have seemed very plausible to the audience, as perhaps to us, that the self-proclaimed loving father would not wish to disturb his son's studies, especially since he has been receiving reports that Erostrato enjoys them so much and has become a well respected scholar. Filogono clarifies, however, that the opposite is true, since he does not mind interrupting Erostrato's studies as long as he returns to Sicily with him. Why would a loving and caring father wish to interrupt his son's studies, even though in letters sent

²⁷ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 76-77.

to him back home, the son begs his father to allow him to continue in the studies through which he gains fame and reputation?²⁸ Filogono's answer is that "if I were dying and my son weren't there, I'd die of despair."²⁹

Filogono and the Ferraran agree that paternal love is superior to all other types of love, but they differ in their understanding of the exact nature of this love. Although Erostrato had begged his father not to cut him off from his studies, Filogono, who seems to be in perfect health, wants his son back just in case he might die. Filogono's neediness is not merely the product of an anachronistic modern reading. The Ferraran too censures Filogono's type of paternal love by saying that "to love one's children is human, but to have such tenderness is womanly."³⁰ The Ferraran does not criticize Filogono for lack of love for his son, but for the affects and needs that Filogono's paternal love contains. Moreover, the Ferraran suggests that this type of love is especially problematic when it is not reciprocated: it is the son who should come to his father and undertake such a difficult journey, says the Ferraran, not the other way around; it is the son who should desire to be at his father's side. Ultimately, the Ferraran criticizes Filogono's type of paternal love because it makes the son his father's object of desire, instead of the other way around.

Filogono admits that, although he dearly loves his son, he has failed to provide what any good father should, namely, guidance and discipline. Erostrato hides his actions at Ferrara and lies to his father, knowing well that his father would not approve of his conduct; he avoids asking his father's

²⁸ "me ha supplicato che dal studio, dove mi promette eccellentissimo riuscire, non lo voglia rimuovere." (IV:3)

²⁹ "se io venissi a morte et egli non vi si trovasse, me ne morrei disperato." (IV:3)

³⁰ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 77. "Amare e' figlioli è cosa umana, ma averne tanta tenerezza è femminile." (IV:3)

permission to marry Polinesta and abuses his father's trust. In a society in which all authority, guidance, and wisdom are held to reside in fathers, this problematic relationship could easily be conceived as the father's fault.

Erostrato runs wild not merely at Ferrara, where he is freed from his father's control and observation, but even at home:

When he was at home he was hot-blooded as young men usually are, and the activities that he took up didn't seem appropriate to me. Everyday he did something that caused me more than a little displeasure. And I, without realizing that I would so regret it later, encouraged him to go study in any city of his choice; so he came here. I believe that he hadn't even set foot here when I began to have regrets.³¹

Quando egli era a casa, gli bolliva il sangue, come alli giovinetti è usanza, e teneva pratiche che non mi pareano buone, e faceva ogni dì qualche cosa, onde io non poco dispiacere ne avevo; e non mi credendo io che increscere tanto me ne dovesse poi, lo confortai a venire a studio in quella terra che a lui piu satisfacesse: e così se ne venne egli qui. Non credo che ci fusse ancora giunto, che me ne cominciò a dolere tanto.(IV:3)

Several important points arise from this passage concerning Filogono's paternal performance. First, although he excuses himself by referring to the behavior of all young men, it is obvious that he could not control his son even when the latter lived at home. But, worse than that, instead of asserting his

³¹ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 77. I have slightly modified Beame's and Sbrocchi's translation.

authority, he encouraged Erostrato to leave home and pursue education in another city. It seems as though Filogono was hoping that someone else would do his job for him, and his neglect of paternal responsibilities indeed resulted in someone else assuming responsibility for Erostrato—the servant Dulippo. Filogono’s image as a passive and weak old man is emphasized even more when he is described by a servant as “questo uccellaccio” (IV:5), and thus draws upon the lexicon of sodomy to allude to Filogono as the passive partner.³²

Filogono’s shortcomings as a father are presented in a similar way to his son’s shortcomings: he is blind to the implications of his actions, and he is impulsive and whimsical. Although Filogono was the one who came up with the idea of sending Erostrato to school in the first place, the son had barely arrived in Ferrara when Filogono regretted his son’s departure and changed his mind about the whole thing. He not only failed to be the authoritative and disciplining father, but he has also failed to serve as a proper role model for his son.

2. Damone and Polinesta

Damone, Polinesta’s father, is the second father we examine. The elderly neighbor, Cleandro, who pursues a marriage with the young Polinesta, hires the parasite Pasifilo to help with the negotiations. Damone takes his time responding to Cleandro’s offer, and when Cleandro wonders why, Pasifilo describes Damone’s performance as a father in the following terms: “he’s a father who wishes to have his daughter well placed; before he makes up his

³² For a brief discussion of the use of this term as a metaphor for sodomy, see Laura Giannetti and Guido Ruggiero, eds. and trans., *Five Comedies from the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 151, note 95.

mind he wants to think about it and then think again.”³³ Damone exhibits quite different qualities as a father from those of Filogono: whereas Filogono intends to interrupt his son’s studies and does not mind damaging his prospects for the future, Damone ponders and ponders again the marriage offers he receives for his daughter. Whereas Filogono is unable to consider the implications of his decisions and displays an impulsive nature, Damone has exactly the opposite qualities.

However, since the audience (and some of the characters) knows that Polinesta is having a love affair under her father’s nose, Damone would not have been perceived as an ideal father. Erostrato is the first character to criticize Damone’s performance as a father. He complains that Damone is ready to marry off his daughter to Cleandro because the latter would forgo the dowry and that he cares nothing for his daughter’s well-being. Of course, the audience is well aware by now that Erostrato is not exactly the man on whose judgment they should rely. In light of his failure to exhibit proper respect towards his own father, his description of Polinesta’s father should at least be suspect.

Damone’s character becomes more complex when he shows a capacity for self-conscious criticism. As soon as the love affair between his daughter and servant is disclosed to him, Damone claims (in III:2) that the man who trusts anyone but himself, as he did when he entrusted his daughter to the nurse, will be miserable. Unlike Filogono, who is unaware of his shortcomings as a father, Damone is well aware that he is the one who should have guided and disciplined his child instead of letting others do this job for him. Hence, he

³³ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 57. “E’ il padre desideroso di ben locare la figliola: prima che determini vuol pensarci e ripensarci un pezzo.” (I:2)

admits that “I, I alone, am the one who deserves to be punished, for I entrusted her to this old whore of a nurse.”³⁴ Damone goes on to list all the things he should have done as a father in order to take care of his daughter and protect her honor and his: he should have made her sleep in his room; he should not have hired young servants; he should have been more firm with her; he should have married her long ago, instead of waiting for the best possible match. In short, he should have encircled her with paternal authority.

However, Damone concludes his critical reflection on his paternal performance by saying: “Oh Polinesta, my kindness and my leniency toward you didn’t deserve such a harsh reward.”³⁵ After a long monologue in which he expresses his own failure as a father and admits that his leniency and lack of discipline were the causes of the scandal, he concludes his speech with exactly the opposite assessment: his goodness and leniency towards Polinesta do not deserve what she did to him. In the end, Damone appears as a father who is not merely, by his own account, weak, but also fails to take final responsibility for his shortcomings.

Damone is both a weak father and a disgraced man. The damage to his daughter’s chastity would be perceived as socially damaging, since by failing to protect her chastity his own honor has been damaged.³⁶ Hence, when Damone discovers that both his honor and his daughter’s honor have been

³⁴ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 72. “Io, io solo son quello che merito essere punito, che mi ho fidato lasciarla in guardia di questa puttana vecchia.” (III:3)

³⁵ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 73. “O Polinesta, la mia bontade verso te, la mia clemenzia non meritava così duro premio.” (III:3)

³⁶ For the issues of women’s chastity, men’s honor, and vendetta, see Trevor Dean, “Marriage and Mutilation: Vendetta in Late Medieval Italy,” *Past and Present* 157 (Nov., 1997), 3-36.

injured, he wishes to take revenge for the injury done to him. Soon enough, however, it becomes clear that he is unable to avenge his honor:

How should I avenge myself for such a grave insult? If I punish this miserable scoundrel myself for his terrible behavior, as my just wrath impels me to, I'll be punished by the prince according to law, for it isn't right for a private citizen to take justice into his own hands. But, then, if I bring my complaint to the duke and his officials, I make my shame public.³⁷

Come debbo io, ahi lasso! di così grave ingiuria vendicarmi? Se questo scelerato secondo li pessimi suoi portamenti e la mia iustissima ira punir voglio, da le leggi e dal Principe sarò punito io, perché non lice a cittadino privato di sua propria autorità farsi ragione; e se al Duca o alli officiali suoi me ne lamento, publico la mia vergogna. (III:3)

Now that his honor has been injured, Damone bemoans his inability to act both as a father and as a man because he cannot avenge the shame inflicted on him. He is well aware of the social implications of losing honor, and his shame is so strong that he claims nothing is as painful—not losing one's wife or one's children—as losing one's honor.³⁸

In the city of Ferrara that *I suppositi* stages, authority does not lie with the private citizen, but with the duke and his officials. Fathers no longer have the authority to maintain and reestablish individual and familial honor by avenging a wrong. This paternal authority lies with the duke—the ultimate

³⁷ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 72.

³⁸ “Questo [the loss of his honor] è ben quel dolore che vince tutti li altri. Che perdere roba! che morte di figlioli e di moglie! Questo è l'affanno solo che può uccidere, e mi ucciderà veramente.” (III.3)

patriarch. Guido Ruggiero has identified a similar change in Venice from the middle of the fifteenth century onwards: while honor still dominated the rhetoric used to report fornication cases, many of which ended with marriage, more and more such cases were prosecuted by the government, not avenged by the family. This development leads Ruggiero to believe that family discipline was undergoing a change in the urban environment.³⁹

A similar pattern can be identified in *I suppositi*. Damone is aware of his lack of discipline as a father and laments the fact that in the past he did not exert greater paternal authority. He is also aware that in Ferrara he is answerable to other political fathers. In fact, not unlike an adolescent, he is dependent on others placed higher in the paternal hierarchy and will be punished if he asserts autonomy and independence. Not unlike an adolescent, he has no authority in a sphere controlled by fathers. Both Filogono and Damone regret not having kept their offspring right by their side and under their control, but whereas Filogono's regret derives from loneliness, Damone's regret derives from shame.

3. Cleandro and Dulippo

The relationship between Cleandro and Dulippo is, in some respects, the most complicated father-child relationship in *I suppositi*, because the two are unaware that they are, in fact, father and son. Cleandro tells Pasifilo that twenty years earlier he escaped his native city, Otranto, as the Turks were attacking it. He left a five-year-old son behind and does not know what became of him (I:2). Only towards the end of the play (in V:5), does Cleandro discover that his long lost son is Dulippo, whom up to that moment he has

³⁹ Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 43.

known as Erostrato the scholar, his rival in the contest for Polinesta's hand. Hence, throughout the play, the father Cleandro and his son Dulippo struggle to outwit and destroy each other's hopes and plans. The patrilineal thread is broken.

The obvious question concerning the paternal performance of Cleandro is why he escaped Otranto without his son and has never, so it seems, searched for him in all these years? Cleandro not merely deserted his son but has also taken no active measures to recover him or discover his fate. He is, thus, a neglectful and, literally, non-existent father. Cleandro's failure as an authoritative and respectable paternal figure is also indicated by the way the other characters perceive him. The nurse, describing Cleandro to Polinesta, exclaims: "Oh God, there's nothing so foolish as an old man in love!"⁴⁰ Like Nicomaco in Machiavelli's *Clizia* and Filippo in Cecchi's *La stiva*, Cleandro is ridiculed for falling in love with a young woman—a thing perceived as inappropriate considering his life-stage and social status. Instead of serving as a model of authority, rationality, and common sense, the nurse says he exhibits the opposite characteristics.

Yet these negative judgments are provided by two characters of weak moral standing: the nurse who convinced Polinesta to respond to Erostrato's advances, and Erostrato who seduced a virgin and damaged the honor of a respected citizen. It is Cleandro himself who provides the strongest evidence against himself. When Filogono meets Cleandro on the street in Ferrara, he tells him that many years ago he found a little boy who is now his son's servant, Dulippo. He also tells Cleandro that he named that boy Dulippo

⁴⁰ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 56. "O Dio, che pazza cosa è un vecchio innamorato!" (I:1)

because this is the name he cried out whenever he was weeping. These details enable Cleandro to recognize that Dulippo is in fact his long-lost son “who was named Carino; and the Dulippo whom he used to call when he cried was one of my servants who fed him and to whom we had entrusted him.”⁴¹

Cleandro is not a neglectful father because he ran away from the Turks. It is not fear that emasculated him, or Ferrara that limited his paternal authority (as it did to Damone). Even in his native home, Cleandro was a negligent father who, like Filogono and Damone, entrusted the upbringing of his child to the hands of another. It is no wonder, then, that the child called for a servant, and not for his own father, when he was sad and in distress. Nothing symbolizes Cleandro’s failure as a father better than having his son carry another man’s name.

In all three of these relationships between fathers and their children, mothers are not mentioned. Polinesta’s mother is dead, as, presumably, Dulippo’s also is. Cleandro never says so explicitly, but since he is seeking to remarry, the audience may assume that his wife, Dulippo’s/Carino’s mother, has died as well. There is no indication whether Erostrato’s mother is alive or dead, but, since she is not mentioned even once throughout the play, she might as well be dead. When comparing the fathers in *I suppositi* to those in the other plays that have been examined here, it is clear that the absence of mothers has not rendered fathers more powerful and authoritative. Damone, for example, establishes a connection between his failure to guard Polinesta’s chastity and the absence of his dead wife. After noting all the mistakes he has

⁴¹ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 89. “Vedo ormai certo che questo è il mio figliolo, che nominato fu Carino; e quel Dulippo, che chiamar solea piangendo, fu uno allevato mio che lo nutriva, et a cui lo avevo io dato in custodia.” (V:5)

made in Polinesta's upbringing, he laments "Oh, my beloved wife, now I realize the damage that I've caused since I lost you!"⁴² Motherhood does not threaten paternal authority in the world of *I suppositi*, yet the three men still fail as fathers. When mothers are absent and fathers fail, who takes their place?

IV. Surrogate Patriarchy

The play stages domestic realms in which fathers have no real authority and power over their children. There is another realm in the play in which patriarchy is a governing principle, the political realm. When the fathers discover that they cannot exercise their power in the domestic realm and are unable to discipline their children, will they receive guidance and assistance from the fathers of the city? We have seen how Damone faces such a dilemma when he discovers that his daughter's chastity has been taken by his servant. As a private citizen, he cannot avenge his honor himself, but he fears that if he brings the case before the city officials, asking for help, his honor will suffer even more. The public space holds the threat of emasculation, and Damone, indeed, is powerless vis-à-vis the duke's public officials as a child is in relation to his parents. Even though his anger is justified ("iustissima ira"), only the public officials, as the duke's representatives, have the authority to make things right.

Yet Damone does not believe that the duke's officials will be able to restore his honor. On the contrary, he fears that by turning to the city rulers, his shame would increase even further.⁴³ No doubt, he fears the publicity that

⁴² *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 72. "O cara moglie mia, adesso conosco la iattura ch'io feci, quando di te rimasi privo." (III:3)

⁴³ Edward Muir notes that, while in fourteenth-century Italy avenging one's honor was perceived as a natural manly right, by the sixteenth century anti-

the scandal would receive, but there is more to his fear than that. By prosecuting the case on his behalf, and thereby not allowing him to reclaim his paternal authority, the duke's officials emphasize even more his failure as a man and a father.

Do those who replace fathers in the public realm function better than the three domestic fathers? After arriving in Ferrara to find his son, Filogono discovers that someone else has assumed his identity, claiming to be Filogono, the father of Erostrato. Filogono is denied access to his own son's house and is at a loss about what to do next. Lico, the servant who accompanied Filogono from Sicily, says how much he dislikes a city like Ferrara, where such things can transpire. In response, a local man tells Lico that he is wrong about Ferrara because the man with whom Filogono has a dispute (the man who pretends to be Filogono) is not even from the city. But Lico is not appeased and continues to criticize Ferrara:

LICO: All of you are at fault, especially your officials who allow such cheating in their city.

FER: What do the officials know about these things? Do you think they're aware of everything?

vendetta discourse ruled: many elite Italians were torn between their inclination to pursue vendetta and other means of conflict resolution. See Edward Muir, "The Double Binds of Manly Revenge in Renaissance Italy," in *Gender Rhetorics: Postures of Dominance and Submission in History*, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1994), 65-82. Moreover, Costola notes that at the beginning of the sixteenth century the criminal justice system in Ferrara was fluctuating between public corporeal punishments and incarceration; Costola, "Ludovico Ariosto's Theatrical Machine," 189. The character of Damone could very well be an expression of a cultural confusion concerning the "correct" forms of punishment and uncertainty over the ability of the authorities to execute them during this transitional period.

LICO: On the contrary. I think that they're aware of very little and they're not concerned where they don't see any profit. They should have their eyes and ears open wider than the doors of the taverns.⁴⁴

LICO: Tutti ne avete colpa, e più li ufficiali vostri, che comportano queste barrerie ne la sua terra.

FER: Che sanno li ufficiali di queste trame? Credi tu che intendano ogni cosa?

LICO: Anzi credo che ne intendano pochissime, e mal volentieri, dove guadagno non vedano molto. Doverebbono aprir li occhi, et avere le orecchie piu patenti che non hanno le porte l'osterie. (IV:6)

Lico's description of the faults of the city officials is reminiscent of the ways in which the three fathers fail to function. The servant expects the officials to exercise their authority and maintain law and order in the city, and he points out that the officials are unaware of the misconduct that takes place in their domain (just as Damone is oblivious to what takes place in his house and Filogono is ignorant of his son's behavior). Even worse, he claims that they do not care about the injustices that occur in Ferrara since they are more concerned with filling their own pockets than with the welfare of those who depend on them, the duke's subjects. This accusation mirrors Erostrato's accusation against Damone in II:2, that the father does not care for the well-being of his daughter, only for financial advantage. Lico portrays the administrators of the public domain as blind and deaf. Public officials have taken over some of the responsibilities and prerogatives that used to belong to

⁴⁴ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 80.

fathers, yet these surrogates fail to control what happens in their city just as the fathers do in their homes.

There are other instances in which the administration of the city and its justice system are critiqued in *I suppositi*. In IV:8, for example, the Ferraran describes Cleandro, whom the audience has come to know as a greedy and lascivious character, as a lawyer who is the epitome of Ferrara's justice system. The praise that comes from this man's mouth is an implicit criticism, since this is the same man who believed that public officials, who do not know what transpires in their city, are not to be blamed. This is quite a striking critique if we remember that the play was performed for Duke Alfonso I and his court. *I suppositi* does not present an idealized vision of Ferrara, but a city with no functioning authorities to execute the law and guarantee justice. Damone notes how what was once his paternal right—the disciplining of the household, avenging honor, and executing justice—the city officials now claim for themselves. Yet these surrogate fathers fail just as the three fathers do. In both the private/domestic and the public/political realms, *I suppositi* manifests the breakdown of authority.⁴⁵

V. Parentless Children and the Danger of Paternal Surrogacy

⁴⁵ For an interesting discussion of how English Renaissance drama was influenced by the ways in which Italian drama dealt with the issues of the instability of the patriarchal social order, see Katharine Eisaman Maus, "Horns of Dilemma: Jealousy, Gender, and Spectatorship in English Renaissance Drama," *English Literary History* 54:3 (Autumn, 1987), 561-83. Linda Carroll traces the image of weak males in this and other Italian plays back to the political upheavals that Italian city-states faced between the second half of the fifteenth and the early sixteenth century. See her "Who's on Top? Gender as Societal Power Configuration in Italian Renaissance Drama," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 20:4 (Winter, 1989), 531-58.

Since in *I suppositi*'s Ferrara paternal power and authority prove lacking, surrogate figures jump in to fill the void. The result is chaos. Polinesta, for example, is brought up solely by her wet-nurse. The Renaissance precepts of childrearing instructed that mothers be responsible for raising their daughters, preparing them for their future lives as wives and mothers. Polinesta, however, is not raised by her biological mother, but by a surrogate for hire, and the girl articulates the consequences of allowing one's child to be raised by a surrogate figure. When the wet-nurse scolds her for the clandestine relationship with Erostrato, Polinesta divulges to the audience the kind of "education" she received from her wet-nurse:

Who was the cause of it all but you, Nurse? It was you who didn't cease to endear him to me—now praising his beauty, now his fine manners, convincing me that he loved me exceedingly—until I became fond of him, and finally fell in love with him.⁴⁶

Chi n'è stato principio se non la nutrice mia? chè tu continuamente lodandomi, or la bellezza sua, or li gentili costume, or persuadendomi che egli oltra modo mi amava, non cessasti pormelo in grazia, e farmi di lui pietosa, e successivamente accendermi del suo amore, come io ne sono. (I:1)

Polinesta's clandestine affair did not result from an impulsive act of a young girl, but from the guidance and encouragement of a "milk-mother," who taught her charge how to act outside the conventions of her gender and class. Polinesta, moreover, accuses her nurse of accepting a bribe of money, presumably from Erostrato, to influence her to respond favorably to the young

⁴⁶ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 54.

man's advances. Both Damone and Polinesta describe the nurse as untrustworthy. True, at the end of the day Polinesta and Erostrato are revealed to be from the same social class and their relationship is sanctified through marriage. Yet the nurse knows none of this when she encourages Polinesta to enter an affair with the house servant and teaches Polinesta how to behave in a manner that contrasts with the norms and mores of her gender and social status.

The subversive instruction of the nurse is especially apparent at the beginning of the play, when she says "come outside, Polinesta, where we're not confined and where we can be sure that no one will hear us."⁴⁷ The nurse encourages Polinesta to leave the domestic sphere, the paternal domain, and cross into the public sphere of the city. She teaches Polinesta that, while men might equate the domestic sphere with privacy, for women like themselves the public sphere allows more privacy, away from the paternal gaze.

The relationship between the wet-nurse and Polinesta dramatizes the dangers of parental neglect, and especially the type of neglect that enables surrogates to operate with no paternal authority. Filogono provides another example of the dangers that derive from the absence of fathers. While his inability to discipline and guide his son enabled Erostrato to run wild in Sicily, there is one figure to whom Erostrato shows deference in Ferrara—his servant Dulippo. Erostrato not merely borrows his young servant's name and clothes. He truly exchanges identities with him. Dulippo gives the orders, and Erostrato follows. Dulippo guides Erostrato throughout their complex scheme and devises solutions whenever they face a problem. Erostrato confides in Dulippo

⁴⁷ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 53. "sì che esci, Polinesta, ne la via, dove ci potremo vedere intorno, e saremo certe almeno non essere da alcuno altro udite." (I.1)

and trusts his judgment. The relationship between the two adolescents corresponds to the image of the ideal father-son relationship in patriarchal ideology.

Does Dulippo himself, our last fatherless child, have a surrogate father? Even before Cleandro deserted him when the Turks invaded their city, Dulippo received no attention or guidance from his father, who allowed a male servant to raise him. Later on, he is bought by Filogono and raised in his household. There is no reason to believe that Filogono, who was a neglectful father towards his own son, functioned any better as a father figure where Dulippo was concerned. In the elaborate scheme Dulippo devises in Ferrara, he employs a stranger to pose as “his” father (i.e., Erostrato’s father). It is not surprising that the man he chooses is a nameless stranger (referred to only as the “Sanese”): after all, Dulippo knew no real father throughout his life.

Although Dulippo regains his father at the end of the play, for most of his life, he, unlike the other young characters, has had no parental figure who took responsibility for him. And yet, in contrast to Polinesta and Erostrato, this parentless child has not gone wild. The Ferraran tells Filogono that the respectable people in Ferrara praise Erostrato (who is, unbeknownst to the Ferraran, Dulippo disguising as his master) and that the young man has become a great scholar (IV:3). When paternity malfunctions and maternity is erased, is it only the parentless child who becomes an autonomous and adaptable man?

VI. All’s Well that End’s Well?

I suppositi revolves around three fathers and their children. Paternity, on all its levels, proves a failure: whether in the domestic realm or in the public

realm, fathers give their children neither guidance nor discipline. In a world devoid of fathers, it is servants who step in to fill the void. However, this surrogacy promotes even more disorder as women from the upper-class are encouraged to fall in love with their servants, to leave the confines of the house, and to deceive their fathers. Young men from the upper-class exchange roles with their servants while ridiculing and disobeying their elders who, ideally, should have been their role models. It is tempting to read *I suppositi* as offering solely this social criticism, but the end of the play suggests an additional reading.

Without paternal guidance, even the most autonomous adolescent, Dulippo, is eventually helpless. When Damone discovers the affair between his daughter and Erostrato, he incarcerates the latter. In response to this troubling piece of news, Dulippo exclaims:

Alas! What am I to do? What can I do? [...] I must go then and find my master, Filogono, and tell him the whole story without a single lie, so that he can provide a quick remedy to save the life of his unhappy son.⁴⁸

Che debbo io, ahi lasso, che posso fare io? [...] Bisogna finalmente che io vada a ritrovare el patron mio Filogono, et a lui senza una minima bugia tutta la istoria narri, acciò che egli alla vita del misero figliolo con subito rimedio proveggia. (V:3)

The resourceful servant discovers that, when push comes to shove, it is only the father who can save his son. Indeed, it seems that only the cooperation of the three fathers enables the restoration of social harmony at the end of the

⁴⁸ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 86.

play: Cleandro, Dulippo's father, reveals Erostrato's true identity to Damone, Polinesta's father, and recommends him as a son-in-law; Filogono, Erostrato's father, enables Cleandro to discover the fate of his son, Dulippo, and reunite with him. Moreover, he offers Damone a marriage alliance in order to make amends for the dishonor his son has caused Damone and his daughter. The play opens with two women standing out in the street, discussing a clandestine love affair between a girl from the elite classes and a servant. It ends with a public contract between two fathers. Ultimately, social harmony is reached through the alliances that fathers form among themselves; conflict resolution is achieved not through the subversion of social conventions, but rather by the reaffirmation of the existing hierarchies of power.

The reaffirmation of social conventions in *I suppositi* can be explained both by the general nature of the genre and by the specific situation of Ariosto. Richard Andrews claims that, as a whole, courtly comic theatre was meant to reaffirm the courtiers' own superiority and values,⁴⁹ and Masi argues that, because Ariosto held a formal position as a courtier, he was dependent on the rigid political hegemony of the dukes of Ferrara. The court, moreover, was the first audience for his plays.⁵⁰ Yet the reaffirmation of existing social convention and hierarchies of power should be questioned when we consider that Filogono and Damone merely serve as a rubber-stamp for their children's

⁴⁹ Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 21. See also his discussion of how, although *I suppositi* begins by exalting "the anarchic demands of the flesh," it ends with desire reconciled to the restraints of society (39).

⁵⁰ Giorgio Masi, "The Nightingale in a Cage': Ariosto and the Este Court," in *Ariosto Today: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Donald Beecher, Massimo Ciavolella, and Roberto Fedi (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 71-92.

plans and desires: Damone is well aware that he has no way of reestablishing his honor after his daughter has been deflowered in his own house, and Filogono needs to deal with the consequences of his son's actions. The marriage that the two fathers agree upon is precisely what Polinesta and Erostrato were hoping for from the beginning.

If we return briefly to the prologue, it appears that the fathers are caught unguarded "per l'adietro" by their children. It is the adolescents, not the fathers, who advance the plot towards the marriage that will satisfy their desires. The peculiar statement in the prologue—that old men are replaced by the young ("li vecchi sieno da li gioveni suppositi")—thus becomes clear. There are many suppositions, pretences, and role-exchanges in the play. But nowhere does a young man actually assume the identity of an old man. However, ultimately the play demonstrates that it is the young who decide the course of their lives for themselves.

A speech by Lico—the same character who offered the most explicit criticism of the functioning of the Ferrarese polity—illuminates the play's social critique. In IV:4 Lico tells his master, Filogono:

Master, the world is large. Don't you think there's more than one Catania and more than one Sicily, more than one Filogono and more than one Erostrato, and even more than one Ferrara? Perhaps this isn't the Ferrara where your son, whom we're looking for, is staying.⁵¹

Patrone, el mondo è grande. Non credi tu che ci sia più d'una Catania e più d'una Sicilia, e più d'uno Filogono e d'uno Erostrato, e più d'una

⁵¹ *The Comedies of Ariosto*, 79.

Ferrara ancora? Questa non è forse la Ferrara dove sta il tuo figliolo e che noi cercavamo.

Costola suggests that, by alluding to the possibility of a doubling of the characters and of Ferrara, Ariosto shatters the illusion of reality as an integrated wholeness that the *scena*⁵² tries to persuade the audience to accept. Lico's speech reminds the audience that there is more than one privileged perspective from which reality can be observed. He constructs the spectators as readers who can choose between multiple perspectives and perceptions of their reality.⁵³

With the striking suggestion that there are several Catanias, Sicilies, and Ferraras, Lido also instructs the audience to reflect again on all that has been performed on stage. He reminds the audience that *I suppositi* is not a mimesis, but an artificial cultural product and underscores the fact that it is not a representation of reality, but a commentary on it. Lido tells Filogono, and through him the duke and the court of Ferrara, that, while Filogono does not manage to function as a father in the city that they observe, he might do so in a different Ferrara. Ultimately, *I suppositi* does not promote alternatives to

⁵² The *scena* is the painted perspective backdrop of the stage, depicting a city, as well as the set which includes structures that the characters enter and exit as if these were their homes. In a sketch preserved in the Biblioteca Ariostea in Ferrara, believed to depict the set of the 1509 performance of *I suppositi*, the Piazza del Duomo, the courtyard of the ducal palace, the ducal court of justice, the stalls of the merchants, and the Porta Leone and Castel Vecchio all appear. The criticism articulated on the stage regarding the duke's justice system becomes even more relevant when we consider the realistic setting. There were also two houses on stage—Damone's and the false Erostrato's. For a reconstruction of the set of *I suppositi*, see Nino Pirrotta and Elena Povoledo, *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi*, trans. Karen Eales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 316-19.

⁵³ Costola, "Ariosto's Theatrical Machine," 184-87.

existing social conventions, gender stratification, or political authority, but suggests that the audience reexamine the conditions that prevent their full manifestation. It is not a subversive text, but a commentary; it does not dismantle the existing patriarchal ideology of power, but critiques the setting that obstructs its manifestation as *praxis*.

Conclusion: Motherhood as the Object of Desire of the Masculine Identity

Mothers, and the woman within them, have been trapped in the role of she who satisfies need but has no access to desire.¹

[Women in the Renaissance] lacked the means to make their desires more than the motive force behind a request, petition, or plea: for the most part, they were excluded from those institutions that would have given their positions legitimacy.²

My inquiry into the identity formation of Renaissance masculinities has assumed that the theatrical or reading event enacts its culture's ideological assumptions about gender. I have argued that the comedies examined here represent, negotiate, and critique idealized images of Renaissance masculinities by engaging with three main problems that motherhood and mothering presented to patriarchal ideology—the problems of power, authority, and *virtù*. To put it differently, I have employed motherhood as an analytical category that examines the gendered assumptions, attitudes, and identities of Renaissance patriarchal ideology. Unpacking the multifarious ways in which patriarchal masculinity is articulated in these plays in response to the challenges of maternal femininity yields an account of the gender order of Renaissance Italy.

¹ Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 51.

² Constance Jordan, "Review: Listening to 'The Other Voice' in Early Modern Europe," *Renaissance Quarterly* 51: 1 (Spring, 1998), 184-92 (186).

But what relation do the comedies have to the society in which they were composed, performed, and consumed? What do they reflect or question through their various acts of representation? In what sense might we conceive of the plays as fragments of an historical reality? Because they mimic their own contexts—being set in a domestic environment familiar to their contemporary audience and dealing with themes of immediate and pressing concern to that audience—it is tempting to read them mimetically, as mirrors of their society’s norms, practices, and ideologies. Yet, the comedies simultaneously play with or attempt to transform the very contexts that they appear simply to mimic. Moreover, because they rely on a complex interplay between staged reality and the everyday world outside of the theatrical and reading event, they are to a large extent ironic.

The ironic position these comedies undertake exposes underlying paradoxes in the patriarchal formation of masculine identities. Luce Irigaray argues that patriarchal systems of representation exclude the mother from culture, so that, for example,

when Freud describes and theorizes, notably in *Totem and Taboo*, the murder of the father as founding the primal horde, he forgets a more archaic murder, that of the mother, necessitated by the establishment of a certain order of the polis [...]. Give or take a few additions and retractions, our imagery still functions in accordance with the schema established through Greek mythologies and tragedies.³

The Greek schema Irigaray refers to is patriarchy—it is the organizing principle of the polis. She further argues that what is being excluded from, and by, the patriarchal schema is the desire for the mother which is forbidden by “the law

³ Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 36.

of the father,” in fact “of all fathers: fathers of families, fathers of nations, religious fathers.”⁴

The erudite comedies examined here are patriarchal systems of representation—their playtexts were not only composed and performed by, and mostly for, men,⁵ but they also reproduced various Renaissance visions of a patriarchal familial and social reality. Indeed, it is arguable that the prominent absence of mothers from these staged representations of reality derives from the inherent patriarchal need for the erasure of the mother as an object of desire. How, then, can we explain the function of the mother in the four comedies by Machiavelli, Cecchi, and Landi?

The answer to this question is precisely where the relationship between the plays’ staged realities and the realities off-stage becomes ironic. For, as the central thesis of this dissertation argues, the patriarchal formation of masculine identities revolves around the image of the mother. In Lacanian terms, the beginning of identity formation (the “mirror stage”) takes place when the infant recognizes his reflection in the mother’s eyes and realizes that he is segregated from his mother, who is an object distinct from himself. Because identity depends on the ability to internalize external images of oneself (i.e., seeing his reflection in his mother’s eyes allows the infant to perceive himself

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Although there were women in the audience, these comedies were either commissioned by male patrons or targeted a male audience: Machiavelli probably composed *Mandragola* with the hope of pleasing Lorenzo (or perhaps Giulio) de’ Medici; he composed *Clizia* in honor of Jacopo di Filippo Falconetti who had returned from exile; *La stivava* and *Il commodo* were composed under the authoritative control of Duke Cosimo’s regime (*Il commodo* was specifically commissioned for the marriage celebrations of Cosimo); Ariosto composed *I suppositi* for his patron Cardinal Ippolito d’Este .

as an autonomous whole), it arises from a lack—from a desire to reunite with the mother.⁶

Thus the comedies expose a paradox: the formation of a masculine identity (and, in fact, in Lacan's theory, any type of identity) requires that the subject individuate himself from his mother and establish her as an object of desire—as the signifier of his identity. In these plays masculine identities are indeed formed through a negotiation with feminine maternity around the issues of power, authority, and *virtù*. Yet while the mother is essential for identity formation, the patriarchal order of the cultures in which the plays were produced and consumed—as well as the realities they present on stage—rejects and forbids the mother as an object of desire.

All texts reproduce to some extent the commonly held beliefs and the unarticulated assumptions of their times, and some texts are also explicitly or implicitly (or even unconsciously) critical of their contexts. The ironic vantage

⁶ Kathryn Woodward, "Concepts of Difference and Identity," in *Identity and Difference*, ed. Kathryn Woodward (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 44-45. Lacan understands identity formation as a constant engagement with an impossible search for a signifier that will suit him or her. This signifier becomes the subject's object of desire and it can never be fully satisfied because no one signifier—no one object of desire—can exhaust one's identity. There is always some lack or void that still has to be filled. Therefore the subject continues to look for other signifiers and other objects that will satisfy or portray more accurately his or her identity. This constant movement and transformation is the course of desire, and its structure is, according to Lacan, metonymic since, as Dylan Evans explains, "Metonymy [is] a diachronic movement from one signifier to another along the signifying chain, as one signifier constantly refers to another in a perpetual deferral of meaning. Desire is also characterized by exactly the same never-ending process of continual deferral; since desire is always 'desire for something else' as soon as the object of desire is attained, it is no longer desirable, and the subject's desire fixes on another object." See Dylan Evans, "Metonymy (*métonymie*)," in Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996, 113-14.

point of these five plays constitutes them as self-consciously critical, to varying extents. All of them reproduce on stage the patriarchal assumptions that inform their society's practices, mores, and identities. All of them critique some aspects of patriarchy. In four of them, motherhood functions as the litmus of masculinity while in one of them—Ariosto's *I suppositi*—motherhood is almost completely erased as a signifier of identity.

Almost, I say, because in this last comedy a father's love for his son is described as a feminine love, alluding presumably to maternal femininity. *I suppositi* enacts what seems like the ultimate patriarchal fantasy: a world consisting only of fathers and their offspring. But the world represented in *I suppositi* is not ideal but rather dysfunctional, and even in this world devoid of mothers (a world in which "the rule of the father" led to a symbolic erasure of the mother), the signifier of patriarchal masculinity and paternal identity is femininity.

Mandragola and *Clizia* reenact the gender system that regulates their society while offering a biting criticism of the patriarchal vision of masculinity. The male characters in *Mandragola* believe they have obtained the objects of their desire—to sire a son, to sexually dominate a woman—and it appears that the mother (whether Sostrata, Lucrezia, or Mary) is indeed "she who satisfies need but has no access to desire."⁷ Yet the women's ability to satisfy male needs is their *virtù*, since it gives them access to their own desires. In *Clizia*, moreover, the mother actively pursues the means to make her "desire more than the motive force behind a request, petition, or plea."⁸ Sofronia's desires enable her to possess not merely power, but also authority. Machiavelli's

⁷ Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, 52.

⁸ Jordan, "Listening to 'The Other Voice,'" 186.

comedies stage a paradoxical reality by showing their audiences that precisely when patriarchal ideology is the organizing principle, motherhood and mothering become *virtù*.

The patriarchal assumptions concerning power, authority, and masculinity are critiqued also in *La stiava* and *Il commodo*. Both plays question the gendered perception of spaces that patriarchy produces—a domestic, private, feminine space and a civic, public, masculine space. Both plays also problematize the patriarchal typology of feminine virtues and vices.

In addition, Cecchi's *La stiava* presents the relationship between fathers and sons—the relationship idealized by the patriarchal worldview—as extremely competitive and conflicted. No doubt, at least some members of the audience recognized the familial reality that the play mimics. In this way, the relation between this enacted reality and the underlying assumptions of patriarchy, as well as the relation between these two and the reality the audience experiences outside the spectacle, construct a prism for a conscious social critique.

Il commodo re-enacts its culture's dominant assumptions concerning the nature of men and women and their corresponding spheres of influence. The central adult male character, Ricciardo, performs his gender according to the patriarchal precepts of masculinity, yet the character of the wife and mother still resists his authority, questions its source of legitimacy, and endangers his honor.

Thus it is not individual men (such as Ricciardo) who are censured for the way they perform and understand their gendered identities. It is the overall patriarchal structure of society that is the object of scrutiny and revealed to be incompetent. Because the prologue of *Il commodo* announces that the play

mirrors its audience's reality and, thus, establishes a relationship of verisimilitude between itself and reality, it is difficult to establish whether the critique it offers is intentionally implicit or simply unconscious. But in either case, because the play asserts itself as symptomatic of its time, the critique it provides is perhaps the most powerful of all.

These comedies fall within a wider continuum of Renaissance cultural products that negotiate the borders between idealized visions of society and lived instantiations of it. Italian elites often addressed empirical, real-world problems by devising improved theories, projected ideals, or fantasized visions of a perfect social order. In fact, much of the political, social, and cultural contestation that took place in this elite culture was at the level of genre re-invention, unexpected and ironic reversals of convention, and subversive textual play. Renaissance playwrights would have largely agreed with Bertolt Brecht that "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."⁹ My analysis, indeed, has aimed to recover the complexity of Renaissance Italian discourse on gender and identity formation by approaching erudite comedies, not so much as mirrors of their audiences, but as their vehicles for ideological, psychological, and emotional expressions. For the last few years, I too have been a member of the audience. I hope I have succeeded in conveying not merely the analytical stimulation these plays provided me, but also the pure joy I experienced in reading them.

⁹ Quoted in Peter Leonard and Peter McLaren, eds., *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 80.

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