

*“A me non venderà egli vesciche”*: Questionable *medici* and Medicine Questioned in  
Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*

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## ABSTRACT

*“A me non venderà egli vesciche”*: Questionable *medici* and Medicine Questioned  
in Machiavelli’s *La mandragola*  
(Under the direction of Ennio Rao)

In Niccolò Machiavelli’s *La mandragola*, one of the first performed erudite comedies, the ethics of medicine and medical practitioners are continuously called into question. This thesis explores the way in which medicine and medical men are represented in Machiavelli’s comedy, taking into account the time and place in which this comedy was written and performed: early sixteenth-century Florence. I will examine the tropes of the doctor which are represented in the comedy, and draw a link between the negative representations of these common tropes and the humanist medical skeptics.

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## INTRODUCTION

*La mandragola*, Machiavelli's comedy of great acclaim, follows the capers of the young Callimaco along a quest for the fulfillment of his goal: to conquer the lovely Lucrezia. The news of Lucrezia's beauty has brought the youth from Paris to Florence, where Callimaco meets Messer Nicia Calfucci, Lucrezia's husband. Callimaco, who has heard that the Calfucci family has been trying unsuccessfully for an heir, immediately falls into Nicia's good graces by playing the part of the healer and promising to provide the couple with a miraculous cure. Callimaco and his entourage devise a plan to prescribe a potion of mandrake to Lucrezia. The potion will undoubtedly cure Lucrezia's sterility, but, since the mandrake is poisonous, it will certainly kill the first man to sleep with her. Nicia agrees to kidnap an unsuspecting stranger to fall victim. Unbeknownst to Nicia, Lucrezia's elixir is harmless, and the stranger will be Callimaco in disguise.

From the moment that Callimaco appears as a doctor in disguise, the ethics of doctors and medicine are called into question. In this study, divided into three sections, I will discuss the medical skepticism of the period, represented throughout the comedy. In the first section, the parallel evolutions of the medical trade and erudite comedy are discussed. Simultaneously, both medicine and theater are changing in the direction of an increased emphasis on performance and deception. A connection is drawn between the theatricality of the doctor and his plot in *La mandragola* and charlatanry, a new part of the medical trade; "Doctor Callimaco" is read as a parody of the early modern charlatan.

In a second section, I will discuss the specific complaints about doctors and medicine often made by humanist skeptics, and describe how these complaints are represented in *La mandragola*. Finally, I will discuss the maladies treated and discussed in *La mandragola* and *Clizia*, a later comedy also by Machiavelli. Age specific maladies are highlighted in both comedies; in the face of a malady as great as old age, doctors are shown to be helpless and their cures ineffective.

***“Non vorrei mi tenessino un cerretano”*: Charlatanry and Theatricality at Play in *La mandragola***

Machiavelli's *La mandragola* is one of the most important works in Italian theater history. Though the date of its composition is questioned, it is no doubt one of the first of the erudite comedy genre, certainly one of the first performed comedies, and reads, at times, as a sort of treatise on Renaissance theater. Strict attention is given to the classical unities of time and place, which Machiavelli had clearly studied with care. At this point in his life, Machiavelli had become highly concerned with the new, sixteenth-century idea of the performance of an erudite comedy. As a play expressly meant to be performed, a sense of theatricality pervades *La mandragola* as the lustful youth Callimaco disguises himself as a doctor to achieve an immoral goal, directing those around him like actors who are to play parts in his spectacle. The emphasis on tropes of the stage, such as scenery, make-up and costume, serve to heighten the degree of theatricality in the doctor's plot.

The medical profession was evolving along parallel lines. In early sixteenth-century Florence, as Machiavelli's comedy was performed in private houses, and was hailed as a success and an innovation, medicine was also changing. A growing number of charlatans were flocking to Florence and mounting their banks in the piazzas to advertise their miraculous remedies. This new, ever-expanding branch of medicine is one often associated with theater and performance. In *La mandragola*, this connection is highlighted; medical men are linked to actors, and are associated with performance and

deception through the character of Callimaco, who represents a parody of the early modern charlatan.

Theater in the fifteenth-century underwent a period of discovery and development. After the humanists' discovery of ancient theatrical texts, the newly discovered works began to receive scholarly attention. It was not until the sixteenth-century, however, that the re-workings or imitations of the original Greek and Latin texts began to be performed.

In his article "Italian Drama," Ennio Rao explores the evolution of the theater in Italy from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages, a few of Plautus and Terence's plays were known, but they were underappreciated and never performed. With the humanist emphasis on the ancients, however, and the humanists' tireless scouring of monasteries and libraries for ancient texts and manuscripts, the Plautine and Terentian canons were reborn. In 1429, humanist scholar Nicolaus Cusanus discovered in his native Germany a manuscript that included twelve unknown Plautine plays. The manuscript was borrowed from Cardinal Giordano Orsini by Pope Eugene IV, and brought to Florence to be examined and copied by the famous humanist scholar Guarino da Verona. The text was fought over for years until a printed edition appeared in 1472.<sup>1</sup> The Terentian plays enjoyed a similar rebirth. The plays of the Roman playwright were certainly overlooked throughout the Middle Ages until, in 1433, Giovanni Aurispa came upon a long forgotten manuscript including several works by Terence, as well as a commentary on the art of comedy by fourth-century grammarian Aelius Donatus (Rao 190). The plays were performed in Latin as early as the 1480s, albeit rarely and before a

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the flurry of scholarly activity that arose from Cusanus' discovery, namely by Poggio Bracciolini, Codrus Urceus, and Ermolao Barbaro, see Rao 190.

very limited circle. They might be performed in the university, or in papal Rome, where there were some, albeit few, who would understand the spoken Latin. Classical theater was thus re-discovered in the fifteenth-century, and a tradition of scholarly analysis of classical comedy had commenced, but frequent performances would not arrive until the first few decades of the sixteenth-century (Beecher 6-7).

The plays had the potential to provide both entertainment and instruction to a wider, general audience, so a system of reworking in the vernacular and modern adaptation began. In the humanist view held by those who were to take on the task, the works in their ancient form were perfect in every way, so these scholars began to rework the new texts by a system of *imitatio*, a process by which they would retain the classical model and spirit, but adapt the details to better reflect their own Renaissance society and culture.

Some of the first steps in the process toward frequent production of erudite comedy were taken in Ferrara at the Este court, most notably by Ludovico Ariosto. His comedy *La cassaria* was first performed at court on March 5, 1508. Another soon followed; *I suppositi* was completed in 1509. It was with this first production of *La cassaria* that an emphasis was put on scenery, props, and elaborate costumes. The backdrops were painted by Raphael (Rao 191).

Meanwhile, in Florence, though there was no princely court to employ authors or at which to perform, regular comedy or, as we now refer to it, erudite comedy, began to flourish as early as 1506.<sup>2</sup> Erudite comedies were being written, if not yet performed. The first comedy for which we have evidence of its performance and successive acclaim is

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<sup>2</sup> The highly debated date of 1506 is given to a comedy by Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzi.



Machiavelli's *La mandragola*. The composition date of Machiavelli's comedy, which continues to be the most staged comedy from the period, is often given as 1518.<sup>3</sup> For its stage debut, it was performed in a private house among educated elites of the city, or what one might liken to a literary club or society. The comedy was reprinted three times in the 1520s. Evidence of other performances and its many editions speak to its celebration and acclaim (Andrews 50-51).<sup>4</sup>

*La mandragola* was not Machiavelli's first foray into theater, or even erudite comedy, but it is certainly where he perfected the art for which he had always nurtured an interest. Machiavelli's first exercise in classical theater occurred in the 1490s when he translated Terence's play *Andria*. He was interested in the *sacre rappresentazioni*, or late Quattrocento religious spectacle, and copied verses from a production into his notes. The final scene of *La mandragola* is reminiscent of a common *sacra rappresentazione* of the Purification of the Virgin. He seems to have been a peer-reviewer for his colleague Lorenzo Strozzi's comedies.<sup>5</sup> He also participated in a discussion group on theater held in the Orti Oricellari, the gardens of the Rucellai family. Included in the group were playwrights Strozzi, Jacopo Nardi, and Luigi Alamanni. Additionally, the theatricality of many of his prose works, his *Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua* and even *Il principe*, is often discussed (Martinez 206-208).

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<sup>3</sup> It is thought to have been written at the same time as the *Discorsi*, and then published by the Medici in Siena. The first editions are titled the *Commedia di Callimaco e Lucrezia*. It is recorded as later being referred to as *Nicia* (Martinez 212-213).

<sup>4</sup> Records of its prestigious performances all throughout Italy are available. It was performed in Rome in 1520, Venice in 1522, and likely several times in Florence, though certainly once in 1526 (Martinez 206).

<sup>5</sup> He signed a copy of Strozzi's *Commedia in versi* with the phrase, "ego, Barlachia, recensui."

Attention to the classical theatrical norms that were discussed in the Orti Oricellari group is evident throughout *La mandragola*. Aristotelian unity of place stated that the location of a play should be singular and unchanging throughout the entire work. The prologue makes it clear that the place in which the entire comedy occurs is “Firenze vostra.” The unity of time, which states that a comedy should take place in just one day, is also obeyed, and carefully so. In Act 4, Frate Timoteo assures the audience that the author has adhered to the classical unities, even if it might seem otherwise. He addresses the audience and says, “E voi, spettatori, non ci appuntate, perché in questa notte non ci dormirà persona, sì che gli Atti non sono interrotti dal tempo” (Machiavelli, 4.10.255). This address to the audience, as well as the reference to players, spectators, and performance in the prologue, show that this is clearly a play meant to be performed. The first words of the prologue bless the audience. “Idio vi salvi, benigni auditori,” the play begins, and proceeds to describe the scene and give specific directions to the audience (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* Prologo.157).

While theater’s principal goal is to inform and instruct, aspects of theater are also meant to deceive. The production of comedies, certainly one treating such a salacious subject matter as *La mandragola*, was understandably received with skepticism in some circles. Spectators are to believe, for example, that the actors are their characters and that these stories are occurring or have recently occurred in present-day Florence. The visual tropes of the theater, new in this period, are meant to disguise the players and trick the audience into believing that the players are someone else. These agents of deception--scenery, costumes, and makeup--are pointed out in the dialogue.

The evolution of medical practice in the Renaissance, specifically in Florence, is also changing in the fifteenth and early sixteenth-century. Medicine was a highly stratified profession including several different sorts of practitioners, some far more honest and legitimate than others. Like actors in the theater, certain branches of medical practitioners began to incorporate aspects of performance and spectacle into their job with the express intent to evoke awe, to entertain and, in the opinion of many critics, to deceive.

Katherine Park, working specifically on the medical profession in Florence from the fourteenth to the sixteenth-century, discusses the Guild of Doctors, Apothecaries and Grocers. The guild had been established in 1293, an extremely early date when compared to other cities, and its goal was to keep track of the varied players practicing the healing arts in Florence. One might think that the early establishment of such a branch would imply that the medical profession was an organized endeavor, and well-regulated by the commune. The guild, however, does not seem to have exercised much selectivity in the distribution of its licenses. Medical men licensed by the Guild of Doctors, Apothecaries and Grocers were categorized into three types: *fisici*, *chirurgi* and *empirici* (58-59).

Physicians, who were few in number, had attended university and achieved a medical degree. The majority of those licensed to practice, however, were surgeons that had no medical training at all.<sup>6</sup> Surgeons were not required to attend medical school. There was a degree available for surgeons at certain universities, but on a basis of quantitative analysis, the rolls of degrees awarded in the discipline compared with the

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<sup>6</sup> Park analyzes, among other data, the Florentine catasto of 1427 in *Doctors and Medicine in early Renaissance Florence* (66).

practitioners, it seems as if few surgeons bothered with the formality. They were, however, required to apprentice with a recognized practitioner (Park 59-66).

The third category licensed by the guild was made up of *empirici*, who were not required to have any formal education, and many of whom were illiterate. Empirics specialized in a specific medical trade or cure. Some empirics, for example, might treat fractures or dislocations, and were hired by the commune or the hospitals to treat the poor. Others might specialize in teeth, poultices, or wounds. There is evidence that some empirics were even more specialized: one empiric on the guild's roster was listed as specifically treating ringworm; another, cancer. Often a patient would go to an empiric when another physician or surgeon would not perform a certain surgery because of the health risk. Empirics had no qualms about performing the surgery, regardless of risk. If the patients were fortunate, the empiric had watched or assisted a physician or surgeon. This would often be the case, as the trade was typically passed on through the family, from father to son (Park 66-67).

The quantitative data from guild rosters shows that Florence was well suited with licensed healers--be they doctors, surgeons, or physicians--until the outbreak of plague in the fourteenth-century, when the number of practitioners dropped.<sup>7</sup> From then on, it was increasingly and understandably unpopular to practice medicine. David Gentilcore's study *Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Italy* shows that in times such as these, an additional category of healer, the charlatan, surfaced (1-7).

Before the sixteenth-century, the term *cerretano* was only associated with begging and deceit, and was not yet linked to healers and remedy peddlers. The

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<sup>7</sup> Not only were there fewer men to practice, but the idea of visiting the sick, no matter how lucrative it might be, soon lost its luster, particularly among the upper, educated classes.

etymology of the term arises from the town named Cerreto, near Spoleto, from whence tricksters and dishonest people were said to have emigrated.<sup>8</sup> A synonym was *ciarlatano*, from *ciarlare*, or “to prattle.” Another term synonymous with *cerretano* and *ciarlatano* was *montimbanco*, named as such because a beggar or peddler would mount or ascend to their *banco*, or stage (Gentilcore 54-57).

It was in Machiavelli’s time that the term *cerretano* first became associated with medicine and the sale of remedies, and it was Machiavelli himself who first paired the term *cerretano* with the sale of medicine. He defined *cerretano* as a common profession made up of those who promise miraculous cures and peddle in remedies. In the satirical poem *L’asino d’oro*, written in 1517, Machiavelli wrote, “Ultimamente un certo cerretano / de’ quali ogni dì molti ci si vede, / promise al padre suo renderlo sano” (qtd. in Gentilcore 55).

The trade had its origins in street peddling. There was a long tradition of peddling various goods, sometimes even medicine. The everyday appearance of charlatans in the sense which we think of them today, a “pretender to medical skill,” or “one making usually showy pretences to knowledge or ability,” (Gentilcore 1) seems to have been a new phenomenon in the early sixteenth-century. There was a decreased amount of doctors and an increased need for medicine, and the remedy peddlers quickly grew in number. Recognizing the financial possibilities, they began to create and dispense

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<sup>8</sup> Florentine humanist Flavio Biondo wrote in 1448-53: “The people of Cerreto are all devoted to dishonest earning. For this reason all of them go about much of Europe begging and deceiving other people, faking their own great wretchedness and religious vows, and under the guise of religion they return home very rich. And such has become their infamy and sham amongst the public that... throughout Italy all rogues and shameless beggars are called *cerretani*” (Biondo, qtd. in Gentilcore 54).

remedies and cures on a greater scale. Charlatans travelled from place to place, often to cities like Florence where there was a good market for remedies (Gentilcore 92-95).

The most recognizable aspect of the charlatan's trade, according to Gentilcore, was the incorporation of theatricality to their practice. In the sixteenth-century as the trade grew in popularity, charlatans increasingly used acting, improvisation, and comic gestures to sell their medicines. There might be several mock stages in any one of the piazzas of Florence, belonging to the traveling charlatans. Their respective "stages" would typically have a backdrop or scenery of some kind. One notorious charlatan would affix numerous fake medical certifications, accolades, and awards to his red velvet backdrop.

The charlatans would play from a collection of classic tricks and amusements. The townspeople--sometimes thousands--would gather around the stages to watch the spectacles, in which an assistant or an actor would receive a miracle drug that would immediately heal their ailment. The deceptions of the most prominent charlatans were highly inventive and often dangerous (Gentilcore 312-313).

The most successful charlatans became local personalities. Like actors, charlatans took on various stage names. Character names like "Scampamorte," "il Fortunato," "il Gerosolimitano," and "il Mazzafuoco," became well known throughout the peninsula. They spared no expense in the elaborate costumes which they donned. In many cases, though it soon became illegal, charlatans would dress in the traditional garb of a learned physician, all black with a long red coat (Gentilcore 308).

The capers and deceptions of the charlatan led to him (or her) to become a stock character of the *commedia dell'arte*, the improvisational theater that flourished later in

the sixteenth and into the seventeenth-century. Long before this, though, we see a parody of the charlatan in the figure of Callimaco Guadagni. Callimaco is a mirror of the charlatan, a pretender to medical skill, and through deceit, trickery, and performance, he takes advantage of a person in a weakened state and achieves his ultimate goal.

Callimaco is a youth of the upper class, and has been educated in Paris. With the parasite Ligurio, he formulates a plan to disguise himself as a doctor. His position as healer of the Calfuccis' great ailment, infertility, will allow him to ingratiate himself toward Nicia and place him in the position to easily dupe and cuckold the doltish lawyer.

Like the sixteenth-century charlatan, Callimaco is, or pretends to be, a traveler. In Act 2, Ligurio tells Nicia that Doctor Callimaco has just arrived in Florence and is due back in Paris at any moment. He assures her, though, that the good doctor will stay just long enough to treat and cure the problems in the Calfucci family. Since Callimaco has planned to stay in Florence only as long as needed to complete his conquest, one can assume that the reasons for his departure are in order to avoid any trouble in the aftermath of his scheme.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, according to their critics, charlatans traveled widely and frequently in order to avoid any of the repercussions they might suffer if one of their cures was unsuccessful or injurious.

When Nicia describes his problem, Callimaco stalls in order to build the anticipation for the announcement of his great, miraculous cure. The miracle potion is announced in Act 2, Scene 2. The good doctor has the remedy to all of the Calfuccis' problems; its results are guaranteed, it is a potion that "*indubitatamente* fanno ingravidare" (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 2.2.186; my emphasis). Such a bold promise

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<sup>9</sup> The result of his conquest, however, is so successful that he is to remain in Florence for an indefinite period of time. He accepts a key to the house and thus unlimited access to his mistress Lucrezia.

was common in the charlatan's trade. While doctors were no doubt aware that the patient might not be cured, charlatans professed the absolute certainty of their cures.

Like the charlatan's deceptions, a theatricality pervades Callimaco's elaborate trick in Act 4. Callimaco and his assistant Ligurio convince Nicia to have his wife take the dangerous mandrake potion, which will kill the first man to sleep with her. Unwilling to make such a sacrifice, Nicia agrees to kidnap an unsuspecting man in the street (which will be Callimaco in costume) and force him upon Lucrezia.

Heavy emphasis is given to preparing the protagonist's costume. Ligurio tells Callimaco, "Fo conto che tu ti metta un pitocchino adosso, e con un liuto in mano te ne venga costì, dal canto della sua casa, cantando un canzoncino." He continues, directing Callimaco to work on his facial gestures. He tells Callimaco, "...voglio che tu ti storca el viso, che tu apra, aguzzi o digrigni la bocca, chiugga un occhio." For the crowning effect, Ligurio has an additional prop. He says, "Io ho un naso in casa: i' voglio che tu te l'appichi" (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 4.2.238).

The players in Callimaco's grand deceit are Frate Timoteo, Ligurio, and Siro. All are described in the stage directions as disguised. Frate Timoteo has added a limp and a hunchback to accentuate his character. Together, they all show off and discuss their humorous costumes. When Nicia meets the oddly dressed crew, she applauds them for being so well disguised. "Oh" Nicia says to the Friar, "e' si è contraffatto bene! E' non lo conoscerebbe Va-qua-tu!" (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 4.9.250). The efforts to disguise their voices also impress Nicia. One actor has nuts in his mouth to disguise the sound of his voice.



As the group is preparing to catch their target, Ligurio, who has acted as a sort of stage-manager throughout the comedy, passes out stage directions to his players. He sends them to their places, ordering them, “Non perdiàn più tempo qui. 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” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 4.9.352).

In sum, the fields of both medicine and comedy are changing in the fifteenth-century to incorporate performance and spectacle. The comedy is no longer a work meant to be read and studied in its original Latin or Greek by a small, educated elite; it has been reworked, and is now in the vernacular, performed in public, and increasingly meant to appeal to a wider audience. Medicine, too, is no longer in the hands of the educated. It has become a highly stratified trade; in order to satisfy the high demand for medical care, the traveling charlatan has become a commonplace performer in the piazza. Medicine and theater, we see in *La mandragola*, are inextricably linked. In *La mandragola*, a comedy written at the dawn of the sixteenth-century as both fields are changing, we see a heavy emphasis on theatricality and performance in the capers of our false doctor. Callimaco can be read as a parody of the charlatan, a new addition to the already diverse medical field.

## **The Early Modern Doctor and His Credulous Clientele**

We hail the period from the late fifteenth to the seventeenth-century as the medical renaissance, a period full of landmark discoveries in the field. In the early sixteenth-century, however, as Machiavelli's comedy *La mandragola* was read by and performed for humanists and the educated elite, these readers and viewers did not hold this same favorable opinion of doctors or the field as a whole. In this section, I attempt to highlight the growing concern in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, particularly among humanists, as different sorts of doctors, their advice and their wares grow in number and influence.

In *La mandragola*, as we have already discussed, the doctor Callimaco is a fake, a phony who exploits the ailing for his own benefit. In keeping with the humanist opinion, doctors are portrayed as contradicting one another. Their education, practices, and prescriptions are continuously dispraised, and their moral standing is often questioned. Furthermore, Machiavelli parodies the credulous public in the famous character of Nicia, a gullible fool who readily accepts the doctor's orders, emerging duped and cuckolded at the end of the comedy. In true humanist fashion, it is pure wit, cunning and intelligence that triumph over all at the end of the comedy.

At the dawn of humanism in 1368, Francesco Petrarch urged an ill Pope, Clement VI, to distrust the advice of his many physicians, thus provoking a flurry of invectives between one papal doctor and Petrarch. In one of the most famous series of invectives in

the genre, Petrarch decries one particular physician for his worthless verbiage, his despicable tendency to manipulate the public, his proffering of ridiculous medical advice, and his peddling of useless potions. Petrarch assures his reader that he respects medicine, and though his list is short, he even respects a few great physicians. It is this one particularly vile physician that he singles out as most foul, and Petrarch exercises a strategy of *damnatio memoriae* so effective that scholars still cannot identify this nameless physician. In addition to a personal affront, Petrarch is also making a greater claim: a criticism of contemporary physicians and a call for change. Petrarch has been called the father of humanism; he can also very rightly be called the father of this tradition of early modern medical skepticism, a feeling that was much more widespread and influential than the current scholarly tradition emphasizes. Petrarch's invectives, though often criticized as overly prolix and rambling, provide the very best point of reference for a modern understanding of medical skepticism in early modern Italy; therefore, I will refer back to them frequently.

### *A Call for Medical Reform*

In early Renaissance Italy, physicians found their greatest enemy in the humanist movement. Paul O. Kristeller accurately defines the historically problematic term *humanism* as a “cultural and educational program which emphasized and developed an important but limited area of studies” (22). According to Kristeller, the humanists dedicated their lives to the *studia humanitatis*, which, by the first half of the fifteenth-century, “came to stand for a clearly defined cycle of scholarly disciplines, namely grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. The study of each of these

subjects was understood to include the reading and interpretation of its ancient writers in Latin and to a lesser extent, in Greek” (22). This program of study clearly excluded the field of logic, and therefore certainly excluded medicine. In the eyes of humanists, medicine was merely an *ars mechanica*, not a legitimate academic discipline or program, and certainly paled in comparison with the *studia humanitatis*.<sup>10</sup>

Petrarch and others would criticize modern physicians for their pretensions. In his opinion, they invoke the term *scientia* when describing their discipline, while it is nothing more than a corrupt trade. He respects medicine to a certain degree, and also respects the great ancient physicians like Hippocrates and Galen. He feels that respectable physicians like the two aforementioned are rare, and perhaps even extinct. In fact, Petrarch says in his invective, “if they [Hippocrates, Galen, Pliny] came back to life, they would unanimously declare that you modern physicians are their only enemy. Your shameful laziness and dull intellect have destroyed their labors and vigils, and your daily lies make liars of them” (10).

Humanists could not trust a discipline with no clear ancient model. In Petrarch’s fourteenth-century Italy and until the mid sixteenth-century, Galen was unavailable in a Latin translation that humanists deemed credible. If medical students read Galen, they would do so via his Arab translators, in which the humanists had little faith. They did not trust medieval translations as accurate, and they were skeptical of Arab medicine in general. Avicenna’s *Canon* was the reigning translation in the medical universities, and it

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<sup>10</sup> For a review of the tradition of claiming medicine to be a mechanical art see Nancy Siraisi, who traces this trend from Hugh of St. Victor through Petrarch and Salutati in *Medicine and the Italian Universities* (194).

was often criticized. The nomenclature of substances used in pharmacology was often pinpointed as erroneous and contradictory. (Siraisi, *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy* 67).

The humanists were a small, elite group, however. In general society and especially among the lower classes, medicine as a learned discipline had secured a position of some respect since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The northern Italian universities were flourishing and attracting broader European interest and enrollment. Medical guilds began to develop in the cities and enjoy a certain amount of prestige (Park 6).

This widespread respect for the profession was challenged in the wake of plague outbreaks, though scholars differ in opinions on just how much. Park believes the effect of the plague on medicine was drastic, specifically in Florence. She claims that the Florentine medical profession “virtually collapsed” because men from established families chose other, better respected professions (7).

Nancy Siraisi, in her study on *Medicine in the Italian Universities*, argues that the helplessness of physicians in such a time of plague did not cause complete disillusionment, but admits that doctors’ inability to treat the plague did give the humanist critics an extra weapon in their arsenal. She cites Matteo Villani, a Florentine humanist and chronicler:

Di questa pestiferia infermità i medici in catuna parte del mondo, per filosofia naturale, o per fisica, o per arte d’astrologia non ebbono argomento né vera cura. Alquanti per guadagnare andarano visitando e dando loro argomenti, li quali per la loro morte mostrarono l’arte essere finta, e non vera: e assai per coscienza lasciarono a restituire i danari che di ciò avevano presi indebitamente. (Qtd. in Siraisi, *Medicine and the Italian Universities: 1250 – 1600* 162)

It was not only humanist skeptics from outside the field who were calling for change in the way medicine was taught and practiced, however. Ironically, the call would be

answered through a marriage of the warring programs of humanism and the medical arts that occurred in the mid sixteenth-century. A small group of medical humanists, physicians well-educated in both the medical arts and the *studia humanitatis*, were concerned about the highly stratified medical profession, the lack of university trained physicians practicing in the cities, and the legitimacy of the medical curriculum. Though they might not have any influence on the growing number of charlatans traveling from city to city, they could assure that those students attending medical school were highly and properly trained. These medical humanists used their power as professors at the leading universities to instill humanist principles in the medical curriculum. As a result, the medical programs at the powerful European medical schools in Ferrara, Padua, and Bologna were drastically altered and improved.

The first of these medical humanists was another Niccolò--Niccolò Leoniceno of Vicenza. Leoniceno was a humanist in his own right. He had studied under Ognibene Bonisoli, a follower of the great humanist schoolmaster Vittorino da Feltre. By the age of eighteen, Leoniceno was well versed in both Latin and Greek. He taught natural philosophy for a few years at Padua, where he had taken his degree in arts and medicine, but spent the rest of his years teaching practical medicine, moral philosophy, and theoretical medicine in Ferrara. Leoniceno dedicated himself to changing the way medicine was studied, taught, and practiced. Leoniceno, like his fellow humanists, was an avid collector of ancient texts; his collection included the most Greek medical, scientific and philosophical works of any collection in his time.<sup>11</sup> It is Leoniceno whom we credit with the translation of many important Galenic works from the original Greek into the

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<sup>11</sup> At the time of his death, Leoniceno's library numbered over seventy-five Greek manuscripts (Grendler 325).

more accessible Latin. He edited a Latin translation of Galen's *Methodus melendi* and *De arte curativa ad Glauconem*, printed by the Aldine press in 1500 (Grendler 325).

Though it was one of Leoniceno's life goals to see the complete works of Galen translated during his lifetime, it was not until after Leoniceno's death that this feat was achieved. Finally, in a publication that would have pleased even the most stubborn humanist, in 1541 the Giunti press published a folio-sized, ten-part Latin edition of most of Galen's corpus. This undertaking was the result of a collaborative work by many of Leoniceno's students and followers (Grendler 325-27).<sup>12</sup>

Leoniceno's followers at Ferrara and elsewhere would achieve great fame and further the goals of their teacher. Giovanni Manardo, for example, was one who vehemently objected to Avicenna's *Canon*. He called it a "dense cloud and infinite chaos of obscurities" (qtd. in Grendler 328). Another pupil of Leoniceno, Antonio Musa Brasavola, shared Leoniceno and Manardo's views. A strong Galenist and another purist, Brasavola used his superior Greek knowledge to examine Galen in the original and write prolifically on medical botany (Grendler 328).

The humanist principles soon gained ground within the medical curriculum and were incorporated into every medical student's education. By 1550, students were taught and expected to study the ancient Greek and Latin texts in their original language. This trend began in Ferrara with Leoniceno and his followers, but quickly spread to the powerful universities at Padua and Bologna. According to Paul Grendler, "enough

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<sup>12</sup> Among the collaborators were notable physicians and academics who can all be included into this new category of medical humanists. Contributors to the 1541 Giunti edition were Agostino Gadaldino, Giovanni Battista Da Monte and Andreas Vesalius. For more of the humanist contributions to the translation of ancient medical literature, see Grendler 327.

changed that the physician of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries might have had trouble finding his way through the teaching and research of Italian universities after 1550” (352).

### *A Susceptible Target*

The skeptical humanists made their discontent with modern medical practice known through a variety of avenues. Petrarch, as we have seen, chose directly to criticize one physician and his contemporaries by means of an invective. Coluccio Salutati echoes Petrarch in *De nobilitate legum et medicinae*. Siraisi has highlighted medical skepticism in the works of Pico della Mirandola and Juan Luis Vives (*Medicine and the Italian Universities* 184-202). Andrea Carlino suggests skepticism in Henricus Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim and later in the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne and in Molière. In *Petrarch and the Early Modern Critics of Medicine*, Carlino calls for further attention to this understudied field of research (Carlino 559).

Before Leonicensio and his followers virtually transformed the educational system in the medical schools, before the guilds began to enforce stricter rules regarding licensing, and in a period in which there were multitudes of untrained tradesmen practicing medicine in the piazza, there was naturally a great deal of skepticism of the medical man and his trade, particularly among the humanists and the learned upper classes. In *La mandragola*, such societal criticism is shown through satirical representations of the doctor’s questionable morals, procedures, and prescriptions. The general, unlearned, overly credulous public is represented via the rhetorical device of parody, particularly in the character of Nicia. *La mandragola* clarifies that the current of



medical skepticism in the Renaissance was coursing strongly though this period spanning the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The mockery of the doctor, his trade, and his patients would be certain to resonate with an educated audience in the 1520s.

Siraisi's study claims that doctors enjoyed a certain amount of respect in sixteenth-century society, at least among the general public. Petrarch's invective describes how common people worshiped the physician in a manner similar to the way Nicia worships Callimaco. He laments the popularity of the doctor in Italy, and proclaims that the human race is blind for believing the doctor's boastful claim to be "lord of life and death" (Petrarch 6). He believes that "the disastrous fate of our age allows the worst men to rule over the best" (Petrarch 7).

Even some humanists had allowed themselves to be convinced by the cunning doctors and their showy pretences. Siraisi notes that some physicians--granted, only a few illustrious individuals--are mentioned as noteworthy citizens in the humanist collective biographies of the Quattrocento. Siraisi mentions, for example, Bartolomeo Facio, who includes several physicians in his *De viris illustribus* (*Medicine and the Italian Universities* 176).

Nicia certainly falls into Petrarch's category of the common man who easily allows a doctor to rule over him. Skeptical at first, it does not take Nicia long to play right into Callimaco's hands. Foolish Nicia Calfucci, just like the public, quickly allows himself to be duped and cuckolded by the greedy, mischievous doctor figure.

Nicia knows that not all medical men are equal and that some are in the business strictly for profit. He expresses this concern to his parasitic companion Ligurio before meeting with Doctor Callimaco, "Di cotesta parte io mi vo' fidare di te, ma della scienza

io ti dirò bene io, come io gli parlo, s'egli è uomo di dottrina, perché a me non venderà egli vesciche” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 2.1.182)!

However, within minutes of meeting Doctor Callimaco, Messer Nicia is divulging the secret personal details of his wife's reproductive shortcomings. He puts all his trust into the fake doctor, and says that “ho più fede in voi che gli Ungheri nelle spade” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 2.2.188).

### *Proverbial Liars*

Nicia's initial concern was an understandable one, and a concern shared by many others in the period. Petrarch had denounced the object of his invective and his contemporaries of inventing maladies and fueling their patients' hypochondria, implying that he was not alone in these feelings. He declared that it was a common colloquialism to accuse someone of “lying like a physician” (Petrarch 15).

Machiavelli reflects this criticism in the character of Callimaco. He is constantly telling lies to Messer Nicia, to Timoteo, to Lucrezia and even to Siro, his faithful servant. He falsely diagnoses Lucrezia as sterile. He lies about the function of the mandrake root. Next, he lies about the true contents of the potion administered to Lucrezia.

Physicians' lies, Petrarch claims, are of the worst kind. Their lies cause great peril to the ones who hear them (Petrarch 15). Though he is not a particularly sympathetic victim, it is Nicia who will become subject to the peril of the doctor's lies: he is to become a fool and a cuckold.

### *Higher Pretensions*

I have discussed how the humanists would criticize physicians for their pretensions. More specifically, one common complaint was that physicians spout Latin turns of phrase in order to sound highly educated, often using the language incorrectly. Petrarch said in the first of his four invectives against the doctor, “They need action rather than words, all you give them are the immature flowerets of your worthless verbiage” (1).

Machiavelli offers us a satirical presentation of the pretentious doctor spouting some of this “worthless verbiage” in Act 2, Scene 2. In his initial “diagnosis,” Callimaco tells Nicia, “*Nam causae sterilitatis sunt: aut in semine, aut in matrice, aut in instrumentis seminariis, aut in virga, aut in causa extrinseca*” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 2.2.187). Callimaco is not making any great claim here; in fact, he is saying very simply the proverbial “it could be this, that, or the other.” However, he has thoroughly impressed the doltish Nicia strictly through his use of Latin. Nicia leaves the doctor, certain that he is the worthiest man that he has ever encountered.

### *Professional Discrepancies: Where to Bathe?*

Skeptics also felt that physicians were unorganized, they argued with each other, and their “science” had no clear ancient model. They were often denigrated for offering contradictory advice. Petrarch explains that there would be “great and unresolved discord” among the physicians if the pope were to die. They would battle bitterly over his pulse, humors and medication (Petrarch 4). Pietro d’Abano, in his *Conciliator*, mentioned that the dissention among physicians was often used to claim that this *ars*

*mechanica* was invalid and “no more than divination” (qtd. in Siraisi, *Medicine in the Italian Universities* 191).

This dissention is evident in Act 1, Scene 2 of *La mandagola*. Nicia has been advised by several doctors to take his wife to the baths. In their prescriptions, the doctors contradict one another. One doctor says that they must go to San Filippo, while another doctor says to take her to Porretta. Yet another doctor assures Nicia to go to Villa. Nicia concludes that “e’ mi parvono parecchi uccellacci; e a dirti el vero, questi dottori di medicina non sanno quello che si pescano” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 1.2.172).

There was a great surge of medical literature on the baths after their resurgence in popularity in the thirteenth-century. Gentile da Foligno and Ugolino da Montecatini both printed treatises on the mineral properties of different baths. In 1440, Michele Savonarola published the very popular *De balneis* with the Giunti press.<sup>13</sup> This argument about the healing qualities of specific spas and the detailed salutary effects of certain waters, mentioned in Machiavelli’s comedy, was an actual debate among medical writers and can be seen in the varying opinions of these treatises. The details are so similar that Machiavelli most certainly had knowledge of such arguments. Porretta, where one doctor advises Nicia to go, was a spa that was often a topic of debate and contradiction. Tura di Castella said that Porretta water was so salvific that if one were to drink it every day for three years, he or she would live a life free of anxiety. Ugolino da Montecatini, on the other hand, thought it would cause cramps and pain. Others said that the waters at this particular spa could provoke vomiting (Chambers 8-9).

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<sup>13</sup> Da Foligno, da Montecatini and Savonarola were three noteworthy professors of medicine. Da Foligno taught at Bologna, Padua and Perugia in the early 1300s. Da Montecatini taught in Pisa, Florence, and Padua in the late 1300s and 1400s. Savonarola practiced later in the 1400s, teaching at Padua and Ferrara. For a further study of the medical literature on spa treatment see Chambers, 6-7.

In addition to using the example of the baths to portray the contradictions and inexact science of contemporary medical advice, Machiavelli may have chosen the example of the baths to portray an absurd prescription given as a “cure-all” to patients with undetermined maladies or hypochondria. By this period, there would have certainly been skeptics of the “healing waters.” There was a certain amount of risk in a trip to the bath; even much of the medical literature advises bathers to exercise extreme caution. Trips to the baths frequently led to serious side effects such as vomiting, fevers, or digestive trouble. The crippled Alessandro Gonzaga felt that his spa treatments made his condition worsen and he complained that the smell at Petrolio was like hell. There are even several accounts of deaths occurring during or shortly after a visit to the spa (Chambers 14-15).

According to D.S. Chambers, taking the waters was not necessarily one of the “most voluptuous or intellectually charged features of the Renaissance,” either (Chambers 3). Machiavelli most certainly included the baths in the general, satirical sense that had become a common trope in Renaissance literature. According to many, the spa had become little more than a place for promiscuous behavior and debauchery. In a letter to his friend Niccolò Niccoli, the humanist Poggio Bracciolini describes the licentious nature of the German baths of Baden in great detail.<sup>14</sup> It became a common joke that the true remedy for a “wife’s sterility” would be to send her to the baths, implying, of course, that she was entirely fertile and there she would engage in extramarital relations. At the baths, as the joke went, a sterile wife would quickly, miraculously, become pregnant and “healed” of her barrenness. Da Montecatini includes a personal anecdote in *Tractatus de*

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<sup>14</sup> For a comparative reading of the German baths versus the Italian baths, see Poggio Bracciolini in Eugenio Garin’s *Prosatori latini del quattrocento*, 275-305.

*balneis* in which he sent his reproductively challenged wife to the Pisan baths, from which she returned pregnant. Da Montecatini attempts to provide the humorous explanation of her recovery, but admits that even he cannot quite understand or explain the child's conception (Chambers 15).<sup>15</sup>

### *An Unhealthy Fascination with Urine*

Additionally, it was a common humanist trope to chide the doctor for his obsession with urine. In his first invective against the doctor, Petrarch ridiculed him for acting as someone he is not, when he is little more than an opportunist with a urine fetish. "You wish to speak about any subject whatsoever, and forget your own profession which, in case you don't know, means inspecting urine and other things that shame forbids me to mention" (Petrarch 12).

Later, Petrarch remarks on the physician's pallid complexion. True scholars, he claims, become pale from spending hours with their books. Religious men have a pallor that comes from staying in church, praying all day. The physician's pallor, however, has a very different cause; Petrarch blames the physician's pallor on his strange obsession with urine. This specific sort of pale, sickly complexion was commonly known as a "physician's complexion," resulting from hours rummaging around in "sloshing chamber pots" and examining the urine of the sick (Petrarch 13).

In Machiavelli's comedy, we laugh at the inverse situation. "Doctor" Callimaco masquerades as someone he is not—a doctor who examines urine—when, in fact, he is a

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<sup>15</sup> Chambers cites accounts of nobles and wealthy elite who were displeased to find that baths had become a place for the common person, and a trip to the bath was no longer a retreat for the upper classes in "Spas in the Italian Renaissance" (15).

scholar.<sup>16</sup> The scene was clearly written by an author well-informed in the common medical understanding of sterility and fertility, the typical diagnostic tests of the period and the skeptical opinion that many had of such study and practice. In a particularly humorous interchange, Ligurio asks the revered doctor if he will need to see “a specimen.” No elaboration is needed here, for it is understood that this specimen the doctor needs will be a vial of urine. “Sanza dubbio,” Callimaco replies, in a tone that the reader can imagine is dripping with sarcasm, “e’ non si può fare di meno” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 2.2.188).

Machiavelli had witnessed firsthand the doctor’s strange fascination with urine. In a 1527 letter to Machiavelli from one Doctor R., Machiavelli received specific instructions on how to care for his friend Bernardo. One can gather from the letter that the doctor had not even seen the urine himself; he may have merely read a letter describing the urine and come up with a diagnosis based on the description. No other factors seem to have been analyzed; the doctor relies solely on an examination of the sick man’s urine as an indication of his improving health:

Honored Niccolò. From what I gather from your letter, Bernardo’s illness must be over and his urine is much better and you can see that it is less red, and from this, since changes are somewhat to be feared, I judge that you should not move him because the air is better there than here. You will purge him and you will judge from day to day and you will see that the case will turn out happily. His sweat should be dried with hot cloths and do not let him stay afterward in the place where he has been sweating. Be of good cheer. I send you my regards.

Doctor R. (qtd. in Atkinson and Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence* 419)

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<sup>16</sup> We know that Callimaco was a youth of certain means. We learn in Act 1.1 that he was a young man of some property, and a student in Paris.

There are certainly those who would have found a diagnosis such as this based strictly on the patient's urine to be utterly absurd. John Cotta is one who lamented the ridiculous tradition of uroscopy and condemned its practice.<sup>17</sup> In *A Shorte Discoverie of the Vn-observed Dangers of several sortes of Ignorante and Vnconsiderate Practises of Physicke in England*, Cotta says, "Erroneously therefore the common sort imagine, that in the vrine is contained the ample vnderstanding of all things necessary to inform a Physition" (qtd. in Forbes 36).

In *La mandragola*, "Doctor" Callimaco plays his part convincingly; he examines the specimen and discusses it at length. Without performing any sort of test, as if the urine speaks to him, Callimaco declares that he can detect a weakness in the glands. Nicia agrees that the specimen is murky. The educated writer, reader or viewer in this period would know that these two points are mutually exclusive; urine described as "murky" was thought to indicate fertility. Avicenna spoke of "a surface cloud, a yellow iridescent color, a cotton like mass, and granules" as indicative of fertility.<sup>18</sup> John of Gaddesden's *Rosa anglica practica medicinae a capite ad pedes* repeated this information in 1492 (Forbes 36).

Whether or not one agreed with Petrarch, who criticized the doctor of doing little other than staring at yellow vials, or with Cotta, who found this practice fruitless and unnecessary, it is highly unlikely that doctors could take one look at the urine and declare the sample sterile, as Callimaco does. Even today, a couple waits several minutes for a

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<sup>17</sup> Uroscopy being, of course, an anachronism, but it is the best term to describe this early modern practice.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the influence of Avicenna in this period, see Siraisi's thorough study *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy*.



positive or negative sign to appear on the female's pregnancy test strip. Doctors are not "diviners," as Cotta criticized them of pretending to be; they would need to perform tests, none of which provided immediate results.

Roger Forbes describes a few such tests in his chapter *Pregnancy and Fertility Tests*. For example, one Galenic test in Antonio Guainerio's *De egritudinibus matricis* (1500) included a specimen from both husband and wife. A lentil would be dropped into both specimens. In the case of fertility, the lentil would sprout after a certain amount of days; in the case of sterility, the lentil would remain as it was. Other tests instructed a couple to plant a seed in a pot and water the seed daily with the female's urine. If, after a certain period of time, the seed sprouted, the woman was deemed fertile. Another test, based on Hippocratic thought, recommended to serve a woman an elixir of butter and milk produced by a woman nursing a boy. If the woman began to belch, she was sure to conceive. A twenty-first-century reader, hearing the questionable details of some of these diagnostic tests, does not wonder why there was great early modern skepticism in the prophetic power of urine (Forbes 39-42).

#### *Potions: Either Ineffective or Injurious*

It was a cause for concern that many of the potions that doctors prescribed to their patients were dangerous, useless, or some combination of the two. Machiavelli cleverly reflects both accusations in *La mandragola*.

Petrarch is one who accused the doctor of prescribing dangerous medications. He says, "You cry out, but no one recognizes you, except the patients who were deceived by your empty words or poisoned by your exotic medications. They will always remember

you” (Petrarch 30). In Act 2, Scene 6 of *La mandragola*, the faux doctor prescribes a potion made of the mandrake root, of which all variations are highly poisonous. It should have caused concern to hear that Callimaco had only tested the potion six times, but Nicia is entirely under the doctor’s spell (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 2.6.195).

The young doctor does not even disguise the fact that his prescription will kill. Ever the trickster, he lies to Nicia, telling her that it will not harm Lucrezia but will kill her next sexual partner within a week and “non lo camperebbe el mondo” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 2.6.196). He then contradicts himself, as doctors are often thought to do, because in his next line he proposes an antidote. In prescribing this poisonous potion, our doctor’s duplicity is raised to new highs and, since Nicia accepts the plan, and simultaneously any moral respectability Nicia ever possessed is totally destroyed.

Obviously the doctor has lied since the beginning. In reality, the elixir drunk by Lucrezia is a simple, harmless glass of *ipocrasso*.<sup>19</sup> For its intended purpose, therefore, this “potion” is absolutely ineffective, echoing the other great complaint that doctors’ potions were often ineffective. If the patient was in any way cured, it would be by placebo effect and nothing more.

Scholars in the field of medical history have a tendency to put a positivist spin on the history of medicine. The early sixteenth-century is described as the heart of the medical renaissance, carrying with it all the implications of the term renaissance—innovation, progress, modernization. There is a tendency to highlight the great achievements of physicians such as Vesalius, Paracelsus, Falloppio, or landmark discoveries such as the circulation of blood (Harvey) or the Fallopian Tubes (Falloppio).

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<sup>19</sup> In Act 4, Scene 4 Nicia says, “un bicchiere d’ipocrasso, che è a proposito a racconciare lo stomaco, rallegra el cervello...” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 234).

Physicians of such caliber were rare, however, and such noteworthy discoveries were still rarer. Humanists were the first to come to this conclusion. It is clear that physicians were not revered as highly as we might think; in fact, they were frequently criticized and looked down upon for their choice of study and profession.

Art imitates life. We can achieve a greater understanding of daily life in Machiavelli's Italy in an examination of his comedies. His representation of a meretricious, pretentious doctor figure with a urine-fetish who distributes harmful potions helps us to understand that not all of Europe held such a favorable opinion of the medical arts.

## **Gerontology as the Most Inexact Field of Medicine and the Incurable Old Age**

The illnesses with which the characters in *La mandragola* and *Clizia* are afflicted were (and still are) often thought of as age-specific maladies. Messer Nicia “se non è giovane, non è al tutto vecchio, come pare” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* 1.1.166), but he must be significantly older than both Lucrezia and Callimaco, who are both referred in the prologue and throughout the play as “un giovane” and “una giovane” (Machiavelli, *La mandragola* Prologo.156). The great age different between Lucrezia and Nicia is mentioned several times throughout the text. In *Clizia*, Nicomaco is an old man who seeks an extramarital affair with his young ward, Clizia. Though the term “old” is hotly debated in regards to how it was understood during this period, Nicomaco is undeniably old—he is seventy--and needs a sexual stimulant and a nutritious meal to prepare him for his exciting evening with Clizia. Both characters shed great light on the medical concerns of the early sixteenth-century.

The Italian Renaissance was a period in which youth, power, and beauty were praised above all other attributes. The fascination with youth and the castigation of old age spanned disciplines. Castiglione’s *Il libro del Cortigiano* argued that an old man has no place in courtly society. Machiavelli’s own treatise *L’arte di guerra* blamed the passive, weak elderly men of Florence for the city’s political setbacks. Explorers sought tirelessly for the fountain of youth in the new world. Venetian artist Giorgione painted a

pitiful, disgusting old woman—*La vecchia*—with wrinkled skin, decaying teeth, and a receding hairline.

Late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century physicians, too, were fascinated with prolonging youth and beauty. They sought to identify the causes of old age in order to avoid it, and, doing so, avoid death. Medical laymen—these lesser physicians to which Petrarch so vehemently objected—published countless advice manuals and suggested remedies to combat the effects of old age. Doctors would recommend an elixir of the blood of young men, or the famous *aurum potable*. In his *History of Old Age from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Georges Minois describes the research of the causes and treatment of old age in the early sixteenth-century as an imprecise and unorganized field of study. He states that “their means of investigation [was] puerile and muddled, confusing serious aspects with the most extravagant fantasies...” (Minois 270).

These physicians’ contemporary critics were aware even in the early modern period that the study of old age was chaotic and untrustworthy. The common complaint that the field had no real ancient model was made once again. Galen had coined the term “gerocomy,” or the care of the aged, but the only available translations of his work on the subject were done by Arab translations and thus deemed unacceptable by the humanists. The physician Gabriele Zerbi, who had read Galen via his Arabic translators, brought up the term in 1489 in his treatise *Gerontocomia*. Unfortunately, very few copies of this work were in circulation, making it equally difficult to access. If a humanist had been able to access Zerbi’s text, he would have dismissed it as unreliable, as it was based on an unacceptable source.

Humanists preferred the advice of ancient philosophers to the plebeian doctor commenting on an Arabo-Latin translation. They looked instead to Plutarch's *An seni sit gerenda res publica* (c. 100 CE) or to Cicero's *De senectute* (44 BCE). These texts advised memory training and a rural lifestyle for an aging man keen on preserving his health. Desiderius Erasmus was one of the kinder humanist critics of medicine. In his opinion, physicians could cure some minor illnesses. However, there was one illness that not even the greatest physicians can cure: old age. "The ugly old age, a dreadful illness, cannot be stopped or cured by any remedy," he wrote in his *Carmen alpestre* (qtd in Campbell 12). In his later years, Erasmus praised his own doctor, Guilielmus Copus of Basle (himself a humanist scholar), but admitted that even Copus could not help him in that final illness. "Given all his talents," Erasmus said of Copus, "all illnesses have to give way to his personality and his authority – with one exception: old age" (qtd. in Campbell 12).

Another complaint with this field of research was grounded in theology. Attempting to combat old age and death went against nature. Doctors, in their prescription of elixirs and herbs, sought to imitate God and alter his plan, a grave offense. Theophrastus Paracelsus, both a humanist and a doctor, claimed to have perfected the *quinta essentia vitae*, an elixir of life containing gold similar to the popular *aurum potable*. Paradoxically, though, for a doctor, Paracelsus refused to prescribe this potion on the grounds that it was "unChristian" (Minois 271). According to Minois, it was the general opinion of the religious objectors that "life had a natural and predetermined end and no one has the right to extend it" (271). Old men should instead be working on *artes*

*moriendi*, or dying well. They should be actively preparing themselves for God instead of avoiding their fate.

In *Clizia*, Nicomaco is competing against his young son Cleandro for the attentions of Clizia. Nicomaco is the subject of ridicule; observers call him an old, toothless fool or a ridiculous buffoon. Even Nicomaco is aware that old age is creeping up to him, so he relies on the medical advice of the period to help him to combat the effects of old age. He drinks a potion of satyrion before eating a specially designed meal. Satyrion, Nicomaco says in Act 4, Scene 2, “Gli ha più bizzarri e fatti, perché gli è un lattovaro, che farebbe, quanto a quella faccenda, ringiovanire uno uomo di novanta anni, nonché di settanta” (Machiavelli, *Clizia* 4.2.356).

To follow the potion, Nicomaco has carefully planned a dinner of cooked onion salad, spiced beans and a half-cooked, bloody roasted pigeon. He describes the intended effects based on the humorous interpretation. “Queste cipolle, fave e spezierie perché sono cose calde e ventose, farebbono far vela ad una caracca Genovese” (Machiavelli, *Clizia* 4.2.356).

After imbibing his elixir and enjoying his strange meal, Nicomaco feels that he is ready for the task ahead of him. He does not know that his clever wife Sofronia has arranged for him to jump into bed with the servant Siro instead of Clizia. After being refused and abused by “Clizia,” Nicomaco finally discovers the truth and is mortified. Having learned his lesson, he lets go of his lusty, lecherous ways and returns to being a model husband and old man. A father to the young girl suddenly appears, and Cleandro and Clizia are permitted to marry.

Therefore, neither the herbal elixir that Nicomaco purchased at the market (most likely from a charlatan) nor the dinner that was intricately planned for its aphrodisiacal powers works in favor of the old Nicomaco. In the end of the comedy, the good and right reign over the wrong, and there is a return to order. There are several winners here, but Nicomaco, an un-clever dolt who sought to challenge both nature, youth and intelligence, is not one of them. Youth triumphs over old age, as the young Cleandro and Clizia end up together. The wit and wisdom of the clever Sofronia reigns over the senile and stupid Nicomaco. And finally nature, which holds that old men should progress toward death without interruption, certainly wins over the latest medicinal trend.



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