

Article

Lucretia as a Figure of Mary in Machiavelli's Mandragola

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Abstract: When studied in political and ideological contexts, the numerous references to the Virgin Mary in Machiavelli's comedic masterpiece *Mandragola* enable us to see how the author not only parodies a sacred play, but also deftly repurposes Christological and Mariological symbolism to celebrate his work's unnamed referent: the first Medici pope, Leo X.

Keywords: annunciation; erotic symbolism; mystical wedding; political theology; sacred play

1. Introduction

“Io voglio giudicare che venga da una celeste disposizione che abbia voluto così, e non sono sufficiente a recusare quello ch'el cielo vuol che io accetti. Però io ti prendo per signore, patrone, guida: tu mio padre, tu mio difensore e tu voglio che sia ogni mio bene.”

So I'm forced to judge that it comes from Heaven's wish that has ordered it so, and I'm not strong enough to refuse what Heaven wills me to accept. I take you then for lord, master, guide; you are my father, you are my defender; I want you as my chief good”.

Mandragola, Act V, IV.¹

Lucretia as a figure of the Virgin Mary, of the Church, and of Italy as the spouse of her redeemer? Mirabile dictu: yes. The present essay, which is part of broader research both on Machiavelli's “courtier” theology and on the structure and meaning of the *Mandragola*, brings to light the complex symbolic value of the character Lucretia.² The portrayal of the ‘Marian’ nature of the most beautiful, wise, and honorable woman in all of Florence covertly but unmistakably invokes the biblical *Song of Songs*, a move on Machiavelli's part that sanctifies the play's eroticism and invests it with political–theological significance. The parody, which presents the adulterer Lucretia as a novel Virgin Mary, turns out to be integral to an encompassing sacred play that has a clear courtly objective: to celebrate and magnify Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici; pope, 1513–1521), head both of the Church and of the most powerful family in Florence.

The play becomes fully intelligible only in light of Machiavelli's comparatively neglected political and intellectual profile *post res perditas*, which I have reconstructed as a progressively increasing engagement with the courts of the Medici popes, first Leo and then Clement VII (1523–1534), who, as a cardinal, had commissioned him to write the *Istorie fiorentine*, and on whose behalf he was later sent on a secret mission to Venice for the establishment of an anti-imperial league in the context of the wars of Italy (Lettieri 2018). If the last two years of Machiavelli's life are proof of his profound involvement with the military, political, and religious strategy of the papacy (as shown by his writing of the *Esortazione alla penitenza*),³ the *Mandragola* evidence of how far his rapprochement with the Medici had already advanced before Leo X's demise. While the comedy lauds the pontiff, its positive reception is attested by Leo's sponsoring a revival of the play in the Vatican in 1520, on the occasion of the wedding of Luisa Salviati, sister of the powerful cardinal Giovanni Salviati and niece of the pope (Lettieri 2019, 2021).



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2. The Mandragola as a Political–Christological Allegory

The Vatican setting of one of the first performances of the play is but one strand in an elaborate and systematic web of references of the *Mandragola*, which replicates, in a different register, the symbolical figures of *The Prince*. In fact, the final exhortation of the *Prince* is addressed not to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici, duke of Urbino, but to Pope Leo X: Machiavelli saw in the fusion of temporal and ecclesiastical power, which happened in Leo's elevation, a "providential" occasion for the miraculous redemption of Italy. Through the reference to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, alluded to in the text,⁴ Machiavelli boldly transfers the Christological dialectic between Christ as head and as his "mystical" body, which suffers and dies but, having been redeemed, is reborn (1 Cor 11:3, 12:12), from the theological–mystical level to the political one. The Pope, the vicar of Christ, is called to be "the leader of this redemption" (Machiavelli 1989a, p. 93): the head of a languishing body, Italy, that awaits redemption.

In the *Mandragola*, the metaphorical level is reached through systematic allusion to the *Song of Songs*, the most erotically charged book of the Old Testament, which, from early on, was read as an allegory of the relationship of God/the Son with a female figure/Israel/Mary/the Church. In the first decades of the 1500s, the structure of the metaphorical marriage between the pope, as vicar of Christ, and the Church was strongly reiterated by prominent curialists, including Cristoforo Marcello, Egidio da Viterbo, and Antonio Pucci, who conjoined the ideology of papal just war with metaphors of mystical marriage drawn from the *Song of Songs*. Sexual imagery is employed similarly by Machiavelli in the *Prince* and in the *Mandragola*. The former portrays sexual dominance in the figure of the young man (XXV, 12–14) who masters Fortune by cuffing and mauling her (Machiavelli 1989a, p. 92), and calls for the rescue of an abandoned and derelict bride, as in the final exhortation to save Italy, who is a languishing spouse who needs a powerful groom. The *Mandragola* presents the same imagery, introducing, in Callimaco, an image of the pope, whose force and sexual dominance will perform the miracle. Callimaco's erotic urge is here a figure of the political and military will to conquer that Machiavelli attributed to the Medici family and, above all, to Leo. We would do well not to allow the play's comic and lascivious tone to distract us from appreciating its more elevated allegorical register, in which the figure of the Virgin Mary plays an important part.

3. Lucretia's Marian Portrait

I have already analyzed, in a broader essay (Lettieri 2019), the presence of a remarkable series of echoes in the *Mandragola* of the *Song of Songs*, both of which feature a relationship between a dominant and powerful male and a feeble female, according to the paradigm of sexual and generative desire. If some scholars—such as Aquilecchia (1971), Perocco (1973), Baratto (1975, pp. 113–18), Triolo (1994, pp. 173–79), Alonge (1999), Newbigin (2008), Stoppelli (2005, pp. 92–105), Boggione (2016, pp. 49–53)—had already noted the sacral references in the text and the Marian nature of some of the allusions, the political context just described and the erotic subtext of the Marian references, sanctified as allusions to the *Song of Songs*, allows us to better understand this framework. These references are not merely crass comic reduction or simple blasphemy (as in Alonge 1999); as will be seen, the *Song of Songs*, which is at the same time a highly explicit erotic description of the passion of two lovers and a sublime allegory of divine love, provides the key to understanding the complex double register of Machiavelli's play.

In this context, the traditional identification of the bride of the *Song of Songs* with the Virgin Mary—which allowed the attribution to Mary of the *Song of Songs*' verses *macula non est in te, immaculata mea, hortus conclusus*—enables the parallel between the bride of the Scriptures and Lucretia. This double typological identification allows Lucretia to be at the same time the purest and most honorable woman in the world and the adulteress conveniently satisfied with the remedy concocted by Callimaco. Correspondingly, Lucretia's nature is said to be without corruption ("la natura di lei, che è onestissima e al tutto aliena dalle cose d'amore... non c'è luogo ad alcuna corruzione» I, I, 5: Machiavelli 2017, pp. 20,

24); the praises to her nature (they gave to her “tanta laude di bellezza e di costumi, che fece restare stupidi qualunque di noi”; “bella donna, savia, costumata e atta al governare”) seem to echo the Marian prayer *Salve regina*.

It bears mentioning that Machiavelli was intimately familiar with the *Song of Songs*’ verses, which we find in the painting of his lover Barbara Salutati, made by Domenico Puligo and possibly commissioned by Machiavelli himself (Slim 2002). Salutati was also the singer of five songs in the 1526 Faenza revival of the *Mandragola*, organized by Guicciardini; the songs had been set to music by Philippe Verdelot, the favorite musician of the Medici popes and friend of Puligo. In the painting, Barbara holds open before her two volumes, Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and a musical partiture with a popular French love song and the Latin motet *Quam pulchra es amica mea, et quam decora, vox enim tua*. These words are a contraction of various verses of the *Song of Songs*: *Ecce tu pulchra es, amica mea* (1:14); *Vox enim tua dulcis et tua dulcis et facies tua decora* (2:14); and *Quam pulchra es et quam decora* (7:6). Here, a courtesan is exalted through epithets from the *Song of Songs* that were traditionally attributed to the Church and to the Virgin Mary *tota pulchra*, but, in Machiavelli’s play, the words carry a purely aesthetic and erotic charge, i.e., to dignify the equivocal identity of the refined prostitute beloved by Machiavelli. Again, the highest sacred expressions of Scripture are subjected to a Renaissance game of reversal. Here, they describe the carnal graces of a courtesan and the enchantment of her voice. Thus, we can see that the allegorical reversal proposed in the *Mandragola* is nothing new in Machiavelli’s environment.

The Annunciation is, as Boggione (2016) recognized, a major theme in the play, and it is the referent of a series of significant allusions: Nicia will be the putative father of the baby conceived by Lucretia, as Joseph was to Jesus; like Joseph, he is a devout man, praying constantly at night; like the archangel Gabriel, he salutes his wife with the words “Blessed are you.” Another reference to Gabriel can certainly be found in the words of Ligurio, who speaks of a “uomo da metterli il capo in grembo” (act II,1,2; “a man in whose lap you can lay your head”: Machiavelli 1989b, p. 786). Here, the allusion, at the same time erotic and sacred, is clearly directed at the conception of Jesus. Moreover, an ironic reference to a miraculous conception is made by Nicomaco in the *Clizia*, who, jesting, declares Frate Timoteo “a holy man”, who “has worked some miracles”: “through his prayers Madam Lucretia, the wife of Messer Nicia Calfucci, who was sterile, became pregnant.” (Machiavelli 1989b, p. 835).

In Florence, the theme of the Annunciation was highly charged. The Church celebrated the feast on the 25 March, which, in the city’s calendar, opened the new year. It has been argued that the Annunciation was the foremost identifying image of Florence (Phillips-Court 2007, p. 245), celebrating Mary’s political association with the city of Florence. This fact is alluded to in the *Mandragola* with an important topographical hint that has usually escaped scholarly notice.

In Act III, I-II Nicia refers to his wife’s vow “to hear the first mass at the Servi for forty mornings” (Machiavelli 1989b, p. 794); she has consecrated herself to the Annunciated Virgin in a church where Florentine women routinely went to pray to be blessed with conceiving a child: the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata, whose painting of the Annunciation (13th century) was considered miraculous. The church had been the object of constant and bountiful attention on the part of the Medici family since the 15th century; Piero de Medici, in 1449, fulfilled the vow, taken on the occasion of the birth of his son Lorenzo by the very devout mother Lucretia Tornabuoni, to build the highly ornated marmoreal tabernacle, based upon Michelozzo’s design, which contained the Annunciation fresco (Liebenwein 1993; Davies 2014). Piero’s devotion to the Annunziata was praised by Feo Belcari in the sonnet which opened his sacred representation: *La Rapresentazione quando la Nostra Donna Vergine Maria fu annunziata dall’Angelo Gabriello* (1465) (Belcari 1996, p. 239).

Therefore, Lorenzo the Magnificent—the father of Giovanni de Medici, who is the key referent of the play—was linked, from birth, to the Basilica dell’Annunziata. Giovanni’s first visit in Florence upon returning from exile was to the Annunziata,⁵ and when elevated as

Leo X in 1513, he conferred upon the church the privilege of a perpetual jubilee, prompting a new iconographical scheme devoted to the Virgin in the cloister of the vows. Nicia's reference to his wife's vow to attend masses at the Church of the Annunziata thus confirms the thesis that the real subject of the *Mandragola* is the generation of the *masculinum* from the Medici family. The allusion is to the "miraculous" birth of Lorenzo de Medici from a woman named Lucretia, and, through Lorenzo to his son, Giovanni, the pope is the new spouse of the derelict Italy.

Allusions to Mary abound in the play; they are not confined to a single scene. For instance, Lucretia is depicted as a *mater dolorosa* in front of Christ's passion when she says that "io sudo per la passione" (Act III,10,1).⁶ More importantly, Lucretia's assent to the sexual union with Callimaco, as reported by the latter, is certainly modeled on the assent of the Virgin in the Annunciation. Consider the passage as the whole:

[Lucretia] doppo qualche sospiro, disse: "Poi che l'astuzia tua, la sciocchezza del mio marito, la semplicità di mia madre e la tristizia del mio confessore mi hanno condotto a fare quello che mai per me medesima arei fatto, io voglio giudicare che venga da una celeste disposizione che abbi voluto così, e non sono sufficiente a recusare quello ch'el cielo vuole che io accetti. Però io ti prendo per signore, patrone, guida: tu mio padre, tu mio difensore, e tu voglio che sia ogni mio bene. E quel che mio marito ha voluto per una sera, voglio ch'egli abbia sempre. Fara'ti adunque suo compare, e verrai questa mattina a la chiesa; e di quivi ne verrai a desinare con esso noi; e l'andare e lo stare starà a te, e poterò a ogni ora e senza sospetto convenire insieme". Io fui, udendo queste parole, per morir mi per la dolcezza. Non potetti rispondere a la minima parte di quello che io arei desiderato. Tanto che io mi truovo el piú felice e contento uomo che fussi mai nel mondo; e, se questa felicità non mi mancassi o per morte o per tempo, io sarei piú beato ch'è beati, piú santo ch'è santi." (Machiavelli 2017, p. 52)

After some sighs she said: "Your cleverness, my husband's stupidity, my mother's folly, and my confessor's rascality have brought me to do what I never would have done of myself. So I'm forced to judge that it comes from Heaven's wish that has ordered it so, and I'm not strong enough to refuse what Heaven wills me to accept. I take you then for lord, master, guide; you are my father, you are my defender; I want you as my chief good; and what my husband has asked for one night, I intend him to have always. You'll make yourself his best friend; you'll go to the church this morning, and from there you'll come to have dinner with us; after that your comings and stayings'll be as you like, and we can be together at any time without suspicion." When I heard these words, I was ready to die with their sweetness. I couldn't answer with even a little of what I tried to. So I'm the happiest and most fortunate man who ever lived; and if I should never lose this happiness through either death or time, I should be more blissful than the blessed, happier than the saints above. (Machiavelli 1989b, p. 819) This passage is one of the most revealing examples of the biblical reversal that characterizes the comedy, bringing into play, as it does, the mystery of the "carnal" union between Christ and the church/spouse/Mary. Lucretia is visited and made fertile by a kind of "heavenly groom", "taken for lord" as sent according to "Heaven's wish", and Callimaco enters this erotic paradise, whose permanence would make him "more blissful than the blessed, happier than the saints above" (Machiavelli 1989b, p. 819). This final hyperbole, which concludes the description of the amorous ecstasy of the "mystery" celebrated in the "sante hore nocturne", contains, indeed, the two privileged epithets which traditionally and commonly designate the pope, namely, Your Beatitude and Your Holiness.

4. Lucretia's Mystical Wedding

The final scene of the comedy encompasses all the play's imagery, fusing two major Marian/Christological episodes: the purification of the Virgin after the birth of the child and the entrance into the Temple in Jerusalem; and the Marriage of the Virgin. While many studies have recognized the presence in the play of these two episodes (Perocco 1973; Triolo

1994; Alonge 1999; Danelon 2004; Stoppelli 2005; Newbiggin 2008; Boggione 2016), the sacral significance of these scenes is more profound than has been recognized. By invoking both the biblical episode and the contemporary context, it simultaneously brings to fruition both (a) the parody and (b) the allusion to the mystical wedding of Christ (and his vicar) with Mary/the Church.

The scene at V.6 opens with frate Timoteo—who, we may remember, is presented in the play (act V, 1) as a devotee of the Virgin Mary⁷—who greets, at the church, Lucretia, accompanied by her mother and her husband; here, they meet Ligurio and Nicia. In this way, the opening presents together, in a sacral atmosphere, Nicia and Callimaco—the husband and the lover, the old man and the young—in a way that upends the sanctioned relationship with the woman, Lucretia. Thus staged, the nuptial ceremony makes the lover the groom, and displaces the old for the new. The substitution—a bigamous marriage, even—was foreshadowed by Frate Timoteo in act III, 11 with words that already allude to the sacral, even eucharistic⁸ nature of the rite: “Do not fear, my daughter. I shall pray to God for you; I shall repeat the prayer of the angel Raphael, so he will be with you. Go with assurance and get ready for this secret act (*misterio*), because it’s now evening” (Machiavelli 1989b, p. 803). Next, the frate addresses Lucretia, saying “may such happiness be yours, Madam, that God will give you a fine boy (*bel fanciul mastio*)” (Machiavelli 1989b, p. 820). Nicia intervenes and presents his wife’s hand to Callimaco, in a pose surely reminiscent of the ancient ritualistic gesture from Classical Rome but charged with an evident reference to the iconography of the Marriage of the Virgin: a scene famously represented in those years by Raphael (1504) (Perocco 1973, pp. 49–50), but already immortalized by Giotto and one of his pupils, Taddeo Gaddi, as we will see. Nicia presents Callimaco to Lucretia as the man “who’ll cause us to have a staff to support our old age” (“quello che sarà cagione che noi aremo uno bastone che sostenga la nostra vecchiezza”, Machiavelli 1989b, p. 820) and announces his intention to give him “the key of the room on the ground floor in the loggia” (Machiavelli 1989b, p. 821), introducing Callimaco into Lucretia’s utmost intimacy. Frate Timoteo concludes, telling Sostrata that “to my eye you’ve put a new shoot on the old tree (*un tallo in sul vecchio*)” (Machiavelli 1989b, p. 821).

In deciphering the scene, we have first to go back to the evangelical account of the presentation of Mary in the temple (Luke 2:22–24) with its quotation of a verse from Exodus (13,2): *Omne masculinum adaperiens vulvam sanctus Domino vocabitur*, “every male opening the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”. If we are correct to identify Machiavelli’s audience as the Curia and the play’s setting as the Sistine Chapel (the site of the 1520 wedding), the double meaning of the reference to this biblical verse is crystal clear. The ritual consecration in the Temple of the firstborn—namely, the first male child who has “opened” the womb that brings him into the world—is applied in Luke’s Gospel to the presentation of Jesus, blessed by Simeon and presented as the Christ attended by Israel. The appropriation of that sacred story in the final scene of the *Mandragola* presents a clear contradiction, as Perocco and Stoppelli noted: in the play, there is no child, no male, to be presented to the Temple. However, the dissonance disappears if one focuses upon the second level of the metaphor: the male presented is not the awaited child desired by Nicia, but the actual *masculinum*, the one who has opened Lucretia’s vulva: Callimaco. On Callimaco’s person, therefore, the obvious sexual metaphor, authorized by the Gospel of Luke itself, adumbrates a Christological meaning which clearly indicates the real referent of the comedy: the pope, the male to whom a solid exegetical tradition referred as the vicar of Christ, the sprout on which the Spirit rested.

We must also remember the presence in Florence of a Confraternity of the Purification, dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the Archangel Raphael: a strategic civic institution and the most important promoter of sacred plays, patronized and attended by the Medici Family since Cosimo the Elder (Polizzotto 2004). According to the statutes, the youths in the confraternity—including the young Giovanni and Giulio de’ Medici—were to perform, every year, a sacred play on the subject; thus, the confraternity educated its youth in the tenets of Florentine civic religion, centered on faith in the advent of the messianic prince,

the new David of the New Jerusalem. If we look at the *Rappresentazione della purificazione*⁹ (Newbiggin 1983)—which was most probably the text performed every year by the young boys—we can see its strong resemblance to the final scene of the *Mandragola*. Keeping in mind how closely “a parallel is established between the redeeming role foreshadowed for the Child Christ when presented to the Temple and the role which the *fanciulli* of the Purification were to play in the fulfilment of Florence’s destiny”, (Polizzotto 2004, p. 87) we can recognize how, through sacred plays such as this, the two Medici cardinals, and then popes, were educated since youth about how they themselves would fulfill messianic promises. On 2 February 1516, Leo X was present in Florence for the Feast of Candelora, which celebrates the Purification of the Virgin and the Presentation in the Temple. By making his entrance that day into the Church, Pope Leo was taking on the role of the *masculinum* (the male who enters the temple, see Newbiggin 1983, p. 83). In short, by alluding to the scene of the Purification, the *Mandragola* was not only parodying Florentine sacred representations but also referring to the fulfilment of messianic expectations that the Medici family had nurtured in the context of the confraternal civic tradition—expectations that had begun to be realized when Leo was elevated to the papacy. Thus, the Marian symbolism here is at once a parodical, erotic allusion, and a much more serious homage to the vicar of Christ who enters the temple, a scene clearly legible for a pope who had been a child of the company of Purification.

If the Purification is key to our decrypting the final scene, the general reference (mentioned above) of the *Mandragola* to the Song of Songs helps us understand the play’s connection with the Marriage of the Virgin. At *Mandragola* V,VI,1, Nicia’s carefully chosen words directed at Callimaco—“Maestro, toccate la mano qui alla donna mia”¹⁰—could be taken to allude to the gift of the wedding ring as depicted by Raphael. However, another representation of the scene of the Marriage of the Virgin, which I am certain Machiavelli had in mind, resonates far more with Nicia’s words here.

The *Marriage of the Virgin* (1327–ca.1338), painted by Taddeo Gaddi, the most talented of Giotto’s pupils, represents the scene of the betrothal of Mary and Joseph as a light touching of hands, a gesture echoed precisely in the *Mandragola* when Nicia invites Callimaco and Lucretia to join hands. More importantly, in the painting, Joseph is surmounted by a staff from which new growth springs and, above it, a dove; imagery that suggests the backstory of the betrothal according to a solid literary tradition. In fact, Chapter CXXXI of Jacopo de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea*—which was based on New Testament apocrypha such as the Proto-gospel of James, the Infancy Gospel of Matthew, and The Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus and Mary—presents Mary as a young woman who, despite her desire to remain a virgin, is forced by the high priest to marry a descendant of David. A voice from heaven orders that each of her suitors be assigned a staff that is to be left at night in the temple; the chosen groom will be the one whose assigned staff would be topped by new growth overnight. The old Joseph, to everyone’s surprise, is the elected suitor. The flourished staff is the symbol of the mystical groom of the Virgin, the Spirit (dove) who will gift her with a son, who will become the Spouse. The fresco’s location is telling: the church of Santa Croce in Florence, in the Cappella Baroncelli, adjacent to the chapel of the Machiavelli family in which Bernardo was buried and Niccolò himself would be interred (Giura 2011, p. 37). Machiavelli, thus, would often have seen this typology of representation of the scene of the marriage of the Virgin, with the touching of the bride and groom’s hands and the flowering staff, on top of which rests the dove of the Holy Spirit who, in Joseph’s stead, will impregnate Mary’s womb with the Messiah.

Thus the *Mandragola* presents a parodic and yet deeply serious reinvention of this ‘triune’ wedding between Mary, the immaculate bride of the Canticle; her aged husband; and the bridegroom/son, that is, the young and powerful staff/*virga/remedy* who, alone, would make her mother. The *staff* and the *shoot*, whose erotic allusion to the phallus is clear, initiates a play of words that is crucial to the general allegory of the comedy: the play between the *virga*/phallus and Christ, through the figure of Callimaco, the doctor (*medicus*),

whose erotic strategy enables expression of the political *libido dominandi* of the Medici pope Leo X.

The extraordinary line with which fra Timoteo addresses Sostrata (“to my eye you’ve put a new shoot on the old tree”) summarizes all the multiple *codices* of the play with an irresistible comic power, authorizing three metaphorical or allegorical interpretations: (a) the shoot is the son, the bud, the young flower, *il bel fanciul mastio* growing in Lucretia, thus sprouted on the trunk of the ‘old’ Nicias, finally ‘made father’ thanks to Callimaco; Timoteo therefore ‘promises’ Sostrata a forthcoming grandchild. (b) The shoot is the phallus, by synecdoche the powerful male, so that “il bel fanciul mastio” is precisely Callimachus, who has, in fact, superimposed himself on the “old” Nicias, taking his place in Lucretia’s heart; and (c) the most profound and revelatory meaning of the term shoot, strangely never acknowledged by critics, is, in my opinion, the biblical one, opportunely expressed by a friar; it is the reference to the *virga*, the shoot, in Isaiah 11:1–2. The Vulgate translation of the verse is *Et egredietur virga de radice Jesse et flos de radice eius ascendet, et requiescet super eum Spiritus Domini* is connected with Is 53:2 (*Et ascendet sicut virgultum coram eo et sicut radix de terra sitiendi*). The *radix* is the trunk of Jesse, David’s father, from which a *virga* (a *flos*, a *virgultum*, a shoot) sprouts; and the prophetic interpretation of the *virga* as referring to the virgin Mary, from whom the messianic *flos*, Jesus Christ, would be born, on whom the Holy Spirit himself would rest, was also well-established. The reference to Christ immediately brings us to the encomiastic reference to his vicar, the pope, here saluted as flower/sprout/shoot, who enters into the temple and mystically weds his bride (Mary/the Church).

In conclusion, in the final ceremony of the play, the ‘marriage’ between Lucretia and her ‘shoot,’ Nicia, stages what is actually a symbolic death, a real substitution, comparable to that of Joseph being substituted for by the Spirit of God (thus with Christ himself as Mary’s husband), or to the *Nunc dimittis* of the old Simeon, or that of the Baptist, who declares that he is not the true bridegroom, but only the friend of the true bridegroom (i.e., Christ; John 3:29–30). As happened for John the Baptist with respect to Jesus, Nicia shrinks in importance, while Callimachus ‘grows’ in the paradoxical finale.

5. Conclusions

To summarize the findings of this brief analysis: Machiavelli’s Lucretia, made a *casta meretrix*, has multiple Marian allusions. To read her story as no more than a blasphemous erotic parody of the Scriptures is to miss its point. It is intended as part of a common language, shared among all the interlocutors and offered to an audience well-equipped to decipher the deeper Christological meaning, and to recognize how that meaning is being appropriated for an encomium of Leo X. Lucretia-as-Mary, therefore, as a symbol of the Church, is a theological–political figure in whom can shine the glory of the Groom who has married her: a new young leader, a *medicus* whose coming was foreordained, and who will not only heal but command.

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Notes

¹ Machiavelli (2017, pp. 49–51); English translation in Machiavelli (1989b, p. 819).

² This essay is a further elaboration of the research presented in Lettieri (2019).

³ Lettieri (2017a, 2017b): the *Esortazione* has to be understood as an anti-Lutheran summary of Desiderius Erasmus’ *De immensa Dei misericordia Concio*, which Machiavelli wrote in the context of his closeness to a high-level circle of curialists and cardinals of Clement VII’s court.

⁴ Chapter XXVI gravitates around the invocation pronounced by Moses, a typos of the new redeemer prince: “Qui si veggono estraordinari senza esempio, condotti da Dio: el mare si è aperto; una nube vi ha scorto il cammino; la pietra ha versato acque; qui è piovuto la manna. Ogni cosa è concorsa nella vostra grandezza (now we see marvelous, unexampled signs that God is

directing you: the sea is divided; a cloud shows you the road; the rock pours out water; manna rains down; everything unites for your greatness)". In fact, the hidden text that supports the Machiavellian quotation, whose aim is to exalt the paradoxical "eschatological" occasion offered by the political misery of Italy as I Cor 10:1–4: "our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ. [...] 6 Now these things occurred as examples [...] These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come". The Pauline text, therefore, presents the same four providential events of Exodus, cited by Machiavelli as signs of the imminent messianic advent of the savior of Italy. Ex 14:21 and 26–31 (the sea which opens to let the Israelites pass and which closes to drown the Egyptians); 17:5–6 (the water which pours out of the rock that Moses strikes); 16:1–36 (manna); 13:21 and 40:36–38 (the cloud which leads Israel on its journey).

⁵ As reported in Cerretani (1993, p. 285); cf. Ventrone (2016, pp. 358–59).

⁶ Machiavelli (2017, p. 97). Machiavelli (1989b, p. 801) translates the line with "I'm sweating with anxiety", in which the biblical reference is lost.

⁷ See Machiavelli (1989b, p. 815), Timoteo's monologue: "All night I haven't shut an eye, I'm so eager to learn how Callimaco and the others have got on; I've been attending to various things to use up the time; I said matins, read a life of the Holy Fathers, went into the church and lit a lamp that had gone out, changed the veil of a Madonna who works miracles. How many times I have told these friars to keep her clean! And then they are puzzled if worship falls off".

⁸ The allusion to the evening can be referred to the notation in Luke 24:29 (*advesperascit* in the Vulgate) which introduces Jesus' Eucharistic epiphany to the disciples of Emmaus.

⁹ Newbiggin (1983, p. 90): "Ma con che lingua o con che sermone/si potrebbe mai dire l'allegrezza/che voi vedrete avere a Simione/quando arà in braccio sua dolcezza?/O giusto, o santo, o fedel vecchione,/quanto fu bella questa tua certezza . . . Vedrete ancora umile Maria/ch'al tempio viene con pudica faccia/portando il suo Figliuolo per la via,/peso dolcissimo alle caste braccia,/ed a Giuseppe vecchio in compagnia;/ed anche lui d'andar molto s'avaccia,/portando seco dua tortorelle,/offerta giusta delle poverelle./Cinque danari darà il vecchiarello,/in segno dell'umana redenzione"; "la mia mente si alietta tutta quanta,/Se questo tuo figliuolo in braccio piglio:/Ché certo son che gli è Cristo re nostro,/Come ben dal Signor m'è stato mostro".

¹⁰ Machiavelli (2017, p. 57). The English translation of Machiavelli (1989b, p. 820)—"Doctor, let me present you to my wife"—fails to capture the symbolic importance of the gesture.

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