Niccolò Machiavelli’s fame as the author of *The Prince* (1513), a treatise of unabashed pragmatism which discusses how to maintain political power to create an ideal society, overshadowed for many centuries his reputation as an author of other writings, some of which, when it came to the theater, showed a jollier, comic, and irreverent side. If *The Prince* was all about “a great feigner and dissembler,” ready to “act treacherously, ruthlessly, or inhumanely” and disregard the precepts of religion in the interest of retaining political power, his plays, and especially *La Mandragola* (*The Mandrake Root*), give us a vivid representation of Florentine society. Beset by iniquity and corruption, the Florence of Machiavelli’s time had experienced war and political strife for the control of the surrounding principalities. There was religious dissent within the church, which was at the center of the popular gossip, while across the border in Germany the Reformation was about to explode. In *La Mandragola* Machiavelli paints a scandal mongering community where debauchery, mayhem, and sex prosper under a strict moral code easily circumvented by local superstitions, customs, and habits. The play centers on a tenet that rejects entirely the ascetic values of medieval religion and advocates following nature and our natural instincts, for human pleasures are mortals’ rights and should be pursued by whatever means. In the play, we also find the theme of human ingenuity (*virtù*), a word that has suffered greatly from the imagination of translators, rendered as valor, talent, ability, strategy, strength, courage, resource, capaciousness, perseverance, intelligence, character, but that for its implementation must be aided by fortune (*fortuna*).1 The writer does not hide his admiration for those who are able to resolve the most difficult situations, relying on their own ingenuity to fool others.

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La Mandragola, originally titled Commedia di Callimaco e Lucrezia (dates vary from 1504 to 1518), was first represented in front of a few friends at the Oricellari Gardens in Florence. Machiavelli’s framework for the play provided a very effective contrast between the moral degradation with the breakdown of law and order at the time it was written and the humorous, satirical outcome of the commedia. Both spectators and actors immediately requested that it be staged in theaters throughout Italy, from Florence to Rome, Modena, and Venice. The enormous success in Rome (1520) and Venice (1522, 1523, and 1526) rewarded Machiavelli handsomely, and Machiavelli as playwright also won the praise of critics for his mordant depiction of Florentine mores. The simple plot and its more complex message had much to do with the play’s success. Set in Florence in 1504, it is the story of the two people mentioned in the original title: Callimaco returns from Paris where he has spent more than 20 years to escape the constant state of war in the Italian provinces, lured back to his native Florence by the renowned beauty of a gentil donna, Lucrezia. On setting his eyes upon her, he falls desperately in love, determined to possess her at all costs and whisk her away from a much older, foolish husband (Messer Nicia). Callimaco confides his passion to his servant Siro, who already knows his master’s inclinations and the motive for his return to Florence, all made clear in Scene 1 of Act 1.

Callimaco is impatient and needs to fulfill his sexual desire. He and his servant come up with a scheme to fool Nicia with the complicity of Ligurio, a parasitical human being and profligate glutton who is easily corruptible with food and money. When Callimaco learns that Nicia wants an heir but for six years efforts in the bedroom have not provided the desired results, he poses as a famous physician and convinces the naïve husband that to impregnate his wife she must drink an extraction from the root of the mandrake thus unleashing the ruse. Callimaco lies to Nicia telling him that there is one “little” problem, a secondary effect that provokes the death of the person who inseminates his wife. The only way out is to find a surrogate, a poor soul who is willing to spend a night with Lucrezia without being told of the drink’s after-effect. It goes without saying that the intended ‘victim’ will be Callimaco himself, posing as a poor wretch. For the hoax to work Lucrezia’s unwitting cooperation is needed. With the assistance of a corrupt friar (Fra’ Timoteo), Callimaco, Ligurio, and Nicia now need to convince Lucrezia to lie in bed with the stranger, a derelict supposedly picked at random in the market place. The naïve Nicia also enlists the help of Sostrata,