

FRANCES TEAGUE

A Conversation among Texts

The term “intertextuality” is complex for a variety of reasons,¹ but the most eloquent definition I know of is the simplest: intertextuality is a conversation among texts.² Set aside all the taxonomic questions about what precisely the terms, “appropriation,” “adaptation,” or “allusion” mean or do. Ignore the theoretical complexities about who or what makes meaning in related texts. If one simply accepts the metaphor as a metaphor, texts do seem to have conversations. In this essay, I want to trace one of those conversations.

Machiavelli and Livy

Let us begin with one of the bogeymen of Early Modern England: Niccolò Machiavelli.³ Exiled from Florence by the Medici, Machiavelli spent his time writing. Most notably he wrote political works, but he also turned out an impertinent play called *Mandragola*,⁴ published in 1518 and produced in 1526.

As Christopher Colenza remarks, “The play is by turns funny, scabrous, and by our standards completely—but typically for Machiavelli’s era—politically incorrect.”⁵ In it, a foolish husband,

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Nicia, assents to his wife, Lucrezia, sleeping with a handsome student, Callimaco. The couple has no children, but a mountebank convinces Nicia that once Lucrezia takes a fertility potion made from mandrake root, she will become fertile. The first man to sleep with her after she takes the potion will die, but then Nicia can impregnate her. The credulous Nicia conveniently meets a student, Callimaco, and fails to recognize that Callimaco has been disguised as the mysterious mountebank. Nicia's friends—a servant, a parasite, a priest—encourage him to arrange the adulterous liaison. While Lucrezia is initially reluctant to commit adultery, all urge her on, including her husband, her mother, and her priest. She agrees, and they all live happily ever after.

In the opening scenes of the play, Machiavelli carefully prepares the plot. Callimaco has been away from Florence for two decades, but explains,

... one day a group of us expatriates were talking, and we started to argue about whether French girls were really more appealing than the girls in Italy, ... and then Calfucci suddenly exclaimed that if all other Italian women should be hideous beasts, there was a relative of his [Madonna Lucrezia] who could win the prize for Italy entirely on her own.⁶

Overwhelmed by desire for the beautiful Lucrezia, Callimaco hastens to Florence, where he learns that the stupid Nicia and his wife yearn for a child. Accordingly he enlists the help of his servant Siro, Nicia's friend Ligurio, the family priest Brother Timothy, and Lucrezia's mother Madonna Sostrata. This crowd of amoral accomplices all conspire to get Callimaco into Lucrezia's bed.

This play is in conversation with another account of a wife reluctant to commit adultery. In Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita Libri* (ca. 25–28 BC) or *The History of Rome*, another group of young men hear praise of a desirable wife. One, Tarquinius, becomes obsessed by the beautiful Lucretia, and while her husband is gone, Tarquinius visits her, intent on sleeping with her.⁷ Tarquinius lacks the support that Callimaco has enlisted in *Mandragola*, and he lacks Callimaco's cleverness as well. Instead of seducing Lucretia, Tarquinius first threatens to rape her, then to kill her if she will not submit. "When he found her obdurate and not to be moved even by fear of

death, he went farther and threatened her with disgrace, saying that when she was dead he would kill his slave and lay him naked by her side, that she might be said to have been put to death in adultery with a man of base condition. At this dreadful prospect her resolute modesty was overcome, as if with force, by his victorious lust."⁸ After the rape, Tarquinius flees, and she then summons her husband and his friends, reports the rape to them, and immediately commits suicide.

Clearly some version of Livy's history influences Machiavelli's play. Not only do the two wives share their name, but the plot details also have obvious similarities as the group of men discussing women inflames the desire of one man to violate both the laws of hospitality and morality. The difference, of course, is that one chooses seduction, while the other chooses rape. Machiavelli wrote a commentary on Livy's *History of Rome* ca. 1517 (published 1531), and in passing he remarks:

... it is seen that Women have been the cause of many ruinations, and have done great damage to those who govern a City, and have caused many divisions in them: and (as has been seen in our history) the excess committed against Lucretia deprived the Tarquins of their State ...⁹

As a political analysis, *Discourses on Livy* regards the earlier text with chilly pragmatism: Tarquinius's rape of Lucretia, his violation of hospitality, and her suicide become "excesses" that deprive a family of its state.

When Machiavelli writes his play in 1518, however, the treatment of women is more sympathetic because less political. The text inverts the choice made by Livy's Lucretia, although it allows Lucrezia to resist before choosing pleasure and life over suicide. She is given an unattractive choice, since if she does not consent, then her marriage will remain barren and all she speaks with—her husband, his friend, her priest, and her mother—will turn on her, but she does choose her fate. As Joseph Barber argues,

There have been hints throughout the play that Nicia is the one responsible for their lack of offspring, so in accepting Callimaco as a lover Lucrezia may have actually resolved the

problem of an heir ... The important note is that destiny took control away from her and threatened to destroy her together with the old lifestyle to which she had become accustomed, but through her own volition and through a positive *mutazione* she regains control. The new order projected in the play for the future is one which she establishes and in which she will be the dominant force.¹⁰

Moreover, her choice works out well. During her tryst with Callimaco, he tells her all, placing himself in her power, but also offering her a bright future in which she will be well-loved, admired by her present husband, and assured of an attractive second marriage. Yet in conversing with Livy's tale of Lucretia, *Mandragola* does underscore how limited a wife's choices are.

If Machiavelli's play text can converse with a classical history written 1,500 years earlier, it can also talk with an Early Modern text a century in the future. I do not mean Shakespeare's poem, *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594),¹¹ which follows Livy's history quite closely and ignores Machiavelli's play. Rather, I mean Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606).¹²

Jonson and Machiavelli

Well aware of Machiavelli as a political writer, Jonson was not enthusiastic. In *Timber, or Discoveries*, Jonson critiques a passage from *The Prince*:

Clementia.—*Machiavell.*—A prince should exercise his cruelty not by himself but by his ministers; so he may save himself and his dignity with his people by sacrificing those when he list, saith the great doctor of state, Machiavell. But I say he puts off man and goes into a beast, that is cruel. No virtue is a prince's own, or becomes him more, than this clemency: and no glory is greater than to be able to save with his power.¹³

Indeed, the entries in *Discoveries* that are based on material from *Il Principe* run for several pages,¹⁴ although this one is the only

entry that mentions Machiavelli by name. Jonson also has his foolish character Sir Politic Would-Be refer to Machiavelli in *Volpone* approvingly. Sir Pol has been spinning his notions about statecraft to Peregrine, and claims, "Nick Machiavel and Monsieur Bodin both / Were of this mind" (4.1.26–27). If Sir Pol endorses a political thinker and speaks of him with great familiarity, one can be sure that the political thinker is unreliable.¹⁵ So far, Jonson's connection to Machiavelli suggests Jonson felt little but scorn for *Il Principe*. Indeed, one might even ask if Jonson knew of or had read *Mandragola*.

Certainly he could have. An edition in Italian of Machiavelli's plays had appeared in London in 1588 (STC 17158).¹⁶ An excellent Latinist, as Jonson was, would probably have little trouble with such a text, particularly if he could count on assistance from a skilled translator like John Florio. When the text of *Volpone* was published, Jonson sent Florio a copy that had the inscription:

To his loving father and worthy friend, Master John Florio, Ben
Jonson seals this testimony of his friendship and love.

The inscription does not say that Florio helped Jonson read Machiavelli's play, of course, but it does suggest that Florio was helpful in some way, possibly advising Jonson about life in Venice.¹⁷ Daniel Boughner has argued most forcefully that Jonson was influenced by Machiavelli, borrowing elements from *Mandragola* when he wrote *Volpone*.¹⁸ Moreover, David Bevington believes Jonson is likely to have known Machiavelli's *Clizia* when he wrote *Epicoene*.¹⁹ Thus, the evidence shows that Jonson had the opportunity to read Machiavelli's plays, which do seem to have influenced Jonson's plays.

A simple list of plot parallels can convince anyone of the relationship between *Mandragola* and *Volpone*. In *Mandragola*, Callimaco hears of Lucrezia's beauty from another man and that account leads him to Florence. There he masquerades as a mountebank to begin his seduction. His performance is successful and wins him access to Lucrezia, and although she resists, when he reveals himself and his plot, he succeeds in winning her love. Similarly, in Jonson's play, Volpone hears of Celia's beauty from Mosca, who tells him

Oh, sir, the wonder,
The blazing star of Italy; a wench
O' the first year, a beauty, ripe as harvest!
Whose skin is whiter than a swan, all over!
Than silver, snow, or lilies! A soft lip,
Would tempt you to eternity of kissing!
And flesh that melteth in the touch to blood!
Bright as your gold, and lovely as your gold!
(*Volpone* 1.5.107–14)

That account leads Volpone to Corvino's house. There he masquerades as a mountebank to see Celia, to fall into lust with her at first sight, and to begin his seduction.

... angry Cupid, bolting from her eyes,
Hath shot himself into me like a flame,
Where now he flings about his burning heat,
As in a furnace, some ambitious fire
Whose vent is stopped. The fight is all within me.
I cannot live except thou help me, Mosca;
My liver melts, and I, without the hope
Of some soft air from her refreshing breath,
Am but a heap of cinders.

(2.4.3–11)

Mosca quickly persuades Corvino to take the role of would-be cuckold and wittol, a man who pimps his own wife, much as Nicia agrees to that same role in seeking a lover for Lucrezia. But Celia is appalled when her husband proposes that she sleep with Volpone, much as Lucrezia is appalled when Nicia suggests she sleep with Callimaco. Celia at first suspects her husband is testing her virtue. When he insists, assuring her that no one will know, she replies, "Are heaven and saints then nothing?" (3.7.53). Corvino continues to insist on her participation, threatening her with violence, and she urges him to "kill me rather" (3.7.94), promising that she will take poison or eat burning coals if he wishes. But Corvino must initiate the violence; unlike Livy's Lucretia, she will not harm herself or consider suicide.

Or any part that yet sounds man about you—
If you have touch of holy saints—or heaven—
Do me the grace to let me 'scape.—If not,
Be bountiful and kill me.—You do know
I am a creature hither ill betrayed
By one whose shame I would forget it were.—
If you will deign me neither of these graces,
Yet feed your wrath, sir, rather than your lust—
It is a vice comes nearer manliness—
And punish that unhappy crime of nature,
Which you miscall my beauty—flay my face,
Or poison it with ointments, for seducing
Your blood to this rebellion.—Rub these hands
With what may cause an eating leprosy,
E'en to my bones and marrow—anything
That may disfavour me, save in my honour—
And I will kneel to you, pray for you, pay down
A thousand hourly vows, sir, for your health—
Report, and think you virtuous—

(3.7.239–59)

She prefers mutilation or death to rape and swears to kneel and pray for him if he will spare her chastity: the only virtuous person in Venice would kneel to pray in the bedroom that holds the idolatrous shrine to gold. Volpone, just as steadfast in his lust as she is in her faith, promises to force her, but is stopped by the young man Bonario, who appears unexpectedly to answer Celia's prayers and save her. Of course, her trials are just beginning, since the Avocatori initially find in Volpone's favor, leading Celia to call upon "heaven that never fails the innocent" (4.6.17). Ultimately her unswerving faith is rewarded, as the Avocatori separate her from her husband and award her three times her dowry.

Among Texts

Listening to texts converse among themselves, however metaphorical that practice may be, has value, if only because what they say may be unexpected. Most thoughtful students of drama experience

a similar experience when watching a play being performed: aspects of the text are opened up and enriched by their embodiment on stage. When we consider all three texts as texts, rather than as scripts, and independently, rather than intertextually, we might explain the difference in the treatment of the female characters in terms of the author and his cultural context. Livy wants to write about the values that made Rome a great city and creates Lucretia; Machiavelli values a pragmatic, if cynical view of the world and creates Lucrezia; and Jonson, especially in the months following the Gunpowder Plot, wants to believe in a world where heavenly intervention can protect innocence and bring justice and creates Celia. Such analyses contribute little that is new.

But if we examine the texts in conversation with one another, particularly if we consider the dramatic texts as plays to be staged, we find that in all three texts, as they tell their tales, men act in the same way: hear about a beautiful woman, desire her, propose adultery to her, and act. The women, however, behave as individuals, in markedly different ways: submit to rape and commit suicide; agree to seduction and a future with the lover; refuse seduction and rape, preferring prayer and martyrdom. Their conversation assumes that men are interchangeable creatures, driven by appetite, and that women are unpredictable.

My thoughts were drawn to this point after watching a thoughtful production of *Mandragola* at the University of Georgia in 2016. The director, T. Anthony Marotta, had considered how to present a sixteenth-century play at a twenty-first-century university given the play's misogyny. To embody such a text, Marotta had an elegant production concept: women played all the men's roles, while puppets played the women's roles (see fig. 1).

Because of the unconventional casting, the production demonstrated the folly of men and the way that their desires denied them agency. In the play's world, however, the men's inability to resist their appetites was set against the way that the women were puppets, helpless to resist manipulation. Such a misanthropic view might have been bleak, but it wasn't. A local reviewer commented,

Still running this week, it's University Theatre's take on Machiavellian (literally!) machinations and misogyny with a



Figure 1. The cast of *Mandragola*, University of Georgia, 2016, with permission from the University of Georgia Department of Theatre and Film Studies.

twist: women dressed as men who are manipulating women. They also manipulate puppets who serve as the female characters in the play. The goal is to get one lusty guy into the bed of a married woman who has no idea what's really going on, and having all the roles played by women brings out the funny in what would otherwise be a creepy antique script.²¹

The audience roared with laughter at the performers' burlesque of masculinity. The production highlighted a cynical world view, but did so with good humor, inviting the audience to recognize themselves in the farce. Similarly, productions of *Volpone* must deal with the near rape of Celia. I've seen half a dozen productions, and in them directors often play with the tone of 3.7, trying to lighten the tone with physical comedy or by inviting the audience to laugh at the events. In some cases, the production has showed the influence of an adaptation by Stefan Zweig, which presented Celia as completely insipid. I have also seen productions in which Celia may object to Volpone's proposition aloud, but use movement and gestures that clearly encourage him to proceed: her lips



Figure 2. A fully realized Celia laments as Volpone stalks her in the Resurgens Theatre Company production of *Volpone*, September 2016.

say, “No, no,” but her eyes and body say, “Yes.” Fortunately the most recent production that I have seen is that of the Resurgens Theatre Company done for the University of North Georgia’s conference celebrating the quadricentennial of Jonson’s first folio (see fig. 2).

This production took Celia’s dilemma seriously, and while the director did emphasize the humor in many scenes, the action of 3.7 was neither melodramatic nor light-hearted. Instead the production gave us a Celia of moral strength and a Volpone incapable of recognizing that strength—or his own weakness.

Among the three women, Jonson’s character Celia seems to me the most interesting for precisely that strength. Lucretia is a straightforward reflection of patriarchal values, and Lucrezia a straightforward male fantasy. Celia, however, refuses to play along with male fantasies, even those of her husband, and chooses to set her faith above all arguments against it. I recall an essay by

Charles Hallett on the importance of Celia's character. He noted all the dismissive criticism, responding

To accept Celia's present relegation by scholars to the status of a minor character—and one of questionable worth—is to destroy the dramatic effect of this scene. Celia, as the character who cannot be manipulated by Volpone, is a figure of major importance. As such, she cannot be presented as insipid on stage, nor can her role be played by an inexperienced actress without harming the production. The primary dramatic fact of the second half of III.vii is that Volpone fails for the first time in the play. The audience must be able to see at this point that the fox has overreached himself.²²

Few critics regard Jonson as a feminist, yet he has created in Celia a woman who insists that her body is her own. While she tries to follow her husband's orders, which a seventeenth-century woman had to do, she balks at any attempt to possess her body. And her meeting with Volpone not only leads to his defeat, but also permits the play to conclude with a providential moment of grace.

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NOTES

1. I have discussed such terminology problems in *Shakespeare Survey*, arguing that all such taxonomic problems ultimately come from mistaking metaphors for empirical statements; "Using Shakespeare with Memes, Remixes, and Fanfic," *Shakespeare Survey* 64 (2011): 75.

2. The idea of "intertextuality" as a conversation among texts is fairly commonplace, but a good explanation occurs in Willard McCarty, "A Network with a Thousand Entrances: Commentary in an Electronic Age?" in *Classical Commentaries: Histories, Practices, Theory*, ed. Roy Gibson and Christine Shuttleworth Kraus (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 382.

3. Christopher Colenza, *Machiavelli: A Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), offers an excellent recent biography.

4. The standard edition is Niccolò Machiavelli, *Niccolò Machiavelli Opere*, ed. Corrado Vivanti, 3 vols. (Turin: Einaudi-Galimard, 1997–2005).

Mandragola is in volume 3. The translation that I am using is *The Mandrake*, trans. Wallace Shawn (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1978).

5. Colenza, 134.

6. Machiavelli, 14.

7. Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, trans. and ed. by B. O. Foster, Book 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 200–201.

8. *Ibid.*, 1:58.

9. Machiavelli, *Discourses of Niccolo Machiavelli on the First Ten [Books] of Titus Livius* (University of Adelaide), Book 3, chapter 26. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/machiavelli/niccolo/m149d/>.

10. Joseph A. Barber, “The Irony of Lucrezia: Machiavelli’s *Donna di virtù*,” *Studies in Philology* 82.4 (1985): 458.

11. *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

12. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Hereafter abbreviated as CWBJ. *Volpone*, 3:1–192, is edited by David Bevington.

13. CWBJ 7:539.

14. *Ibid.*, 7:538–40.

15. Dutton does point out, however, that neither Machiavelli nor Jean Bodin hold the views that Sir Pol attributes to them (CWBJ 3:130n26).

16. Machiavelli, *Lasino doro di Nicolo Macchiauelli con tutte laltre sue operette* (London: John Wolfe, 1588).

17. An image of the inscription is included in the electronic edition of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, ed. David Gants (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/about/illustration_acknowledgements/.

18. Daniel Boughner, *The Devil’s Disciple: Ben Jonson’s Debt to Machiavelli* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1968), esp. 133–37.

19. CWBJ 3:381.

20. Livy, 200.

21. Dina Canup, “Theatre Notes,” *Flagpole*, 24 Feb. 2016. <http://flagpole.com/arts-culture/theater-notes/2016/02/24/lovers-losers-knights-errant>.

22. Charles A. Hallett, “Jonson’s Celia: A Reinterpretation of *Volpone*,” *Studies in Philology* 68.1 (1971): 54.