

## Machiavelli's *La Mandragola* and Jonson's *The Alchemist*: From the Mandrake to the Philosophers' Stone

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Almost 500 years after his death, the name of Niccolò Machiavelli still has the power to incite ideas of unscrupulous self-promotion and the exercise of naked power. This notoriety is largely a consequence of the publication of a slim, history-making, conduct book, intended as a self-help manual for political leaders.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of *The Prince*, Machiavelli is probably best-known as one of the architects of modern political science. He is also now recognized as an observant historian and noteworthy satirical playwright.<sup>2</sup> But the different facets of Machiavelli as politician and creative writer cannot be compartmentalized. Rather, it is more helpful to see his various interests and occupations as being informed by a reasoned interpretation of his observations of the spectrum of relationships, personal, familial and political. I want to attempt to show how Machiavelli's political theories informed his dramaturgical

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<sup>1</sup> *The Prince* was composed at the end of 1513 and early 1514, during the author's enforced exile from government, although it was only published posthumously in 1532. Machiavelli was dismissed from his post in the republican regime when the Medici took over the reins of Florence. The volume, although a valuable politico-historical document *per se*, was written with the ulterior motive of regaining favour in the Florentine government: it was originally dedicated to Giuliano de' Medici, but was subsequently presented to Lorenzo de' Medici when Giuliano died.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to his most well-known political works, *The Prince* and *The Art of War*, Machiavelli also wrote poetry, plays, short prose, and the important historical commentary *Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy*, and a *History of Florence*, commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici in 1520 and completed in 1525.

practices in portraying these different levels of relationship.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, I will try to demonstrate that this politico-artistic philosophy had a significant influence on contemporary literary practices, beyond the borders of Italy, or indeed, the continent.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in England, Machiavelli's fame – or infamy – preceded the first English translation of *The Prince* (1640) by more than half a century, as the name “Machiavel” became a theatrical byword for cunning and deceit, used by English playwrights such as Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of his wide reading and his engagement with the socio-political issues of his day, it seems especially likely that Jonson would have taken a keen and informed interest in one of the most widely-read and talked about – without a doubt, one of the most controversial – political commentators of the age. Despite Machiavelli's condemnation as ‘the devil incarnate’ by Reginald Pole, Jonson does not seem to have shied away from the controversy sparked by the Italian's radical political views. According to George Parfitt, Jonson not only read Machiavelli, but also ‘grasped more of what the Italian was about than most of his

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<sup>3</sup> Theodore A. Sumberg, ‘*La Mandragola*: An Interpretation’, *Journal of Politics* 23.2 (May 1961): 320–340, observes that *La Mandragola* ‘is very serious, written at the top of Machiavelli's form, and part and parcel of his political teaching’ (p. 320).

<sup>4</sup> See Michele Marrapodi, ‘Retaliation as an Italian Vice in English Renaissance Drama: Narrative and Theatrical Exchanges’, in *The Italian World of English Renaissance Drama: Cultural Exchange and Intertextuality*, ed. Michele Marrapodi and A.J. Hoenselaars (Newark: University of Delaware Press and London: Associated University Presses, 1998). Marrapodi points out that ‘two of the most subversive writers of Italian comedy, both banned by the Inquisition, Machiavelli and Aretino, were in fact already printed in London [in Italian] in 1588’ (p. 204).

<sup>5</sup> Mario Praz, *The Flaming Heart* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), states that Machiavelli's ‘*Principe* had already found disciples at the court of Henry VIII’ (p. 7). Henry VIII died in 1547, while *The Prince* only appeared in print [in Italian] between 1584 and 1588: ‘Statesmen, thinkers, philosophers, could read Machiavelli in the original, and an enterprising London printer, Wolfe, supplied the needs of this learned public by issuing the works of the Florentine with a false place of issue (Palermo or Rome instead of London) between 1584 and 1588, thus eluding censorship’ (*ibid.*, p. 100).

contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> Of course, this is difficult to assess with any real certainty. But, in the light of Jonson's comprehensive mode of reading, borne out by his own explicit references in the *Discoveries*<sup>7</sup> and substantiated by Robert C. Evans's detailed *Habits of Mind*,<sup>8</sup> Parfitt's speculation is probably quite close to the mark.<sup>9</sup>

Jonson's exploratory engagement with the world around him – something that encouraged an openness to radical ideas – is all of a piece with the general philosophy of reading that he spells out in various passages in the *Discoveries*. He develops this from Seneca (*Epist.* xxx.ii), who stressed the importance of personal investigation and empirical conclusion. As Seneca avers:

However, the truth will never be discovered if we rest contented with discoveries already made. Besides, he who follows another not only discovers nothing, but is not even investigating. What

<sup>6</sup> George Parfitt, *Ben Jonson: Public Poet and Private Man* (London: J.M. Dent, 1976), p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in *Discoveries* Jonson states 'I have ever observed it to have been the office of a wise patriot, among the greatest affairs of the state, to take care of the commonwealth of learning . . . and nothing is worthier the study of a statesman than that part of the republic which we call the advancement of letters' (lines 934–39): *Timber, or, Discoveries*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. Ian Donaldson, Oxford Authors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 546. Again, he says, 'A prince without letters is a pilot without eyes . . . And how can he be counselled that cannot see to read the best counsellors, which are books; for they neither flatter us nor hide from us?' (lines 1248–53, p. 554). All references to the *Discoveries* are from the Donaldson edition.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert C. Evans, *Habits of Mind: Evidence and Effects of Ben Jonson's Reading* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of transmission, reception and interpretation of texts, see also Robert S. Miola, 'Seven Types of Intertextuality', in *Shakespeare and Intertextuality: The Transition of Cultures between Italy and England in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2000), pp. 23–38. The speculation about Jonson's exposure to and engagement with Machiavelli gains some purchase in light of Miola's explication of the "Source Proximate", which is 'the most familiar and frequently studied kind of intertextuality, that of sources and texts. The source functions as the book-on-the-desk; the author honors, reshapes, steals, ransacks, and plunders. The dynamics include copying, paraphrase, compression, conflation, expansion, omission, innovation, transference, and contradiction' (p. 31).

then? Shall I not follow in the footsteps of my predecessors? I shall indeed use the old road, but if I find one that makes a shorter cut and is smoother to travel, I shall open the new road. Men who have made these discoveries before us are not our masters, but our guides. Truth lies open for all; it has not yet been monopolized. And there is plenty left for posterity to discover.<sup>10</sup>

Jonson's foregrounding of this methodology indicates that his reading was approached in a state of openness and expectation, and followed a process of interrogation rather than an easy concurrence with or rejection of the many authors and views he encountered. In this, both Jonson and Machiavelli are typical of an era characterised by 'questing and experimenting, an age of adventure in the world of ideas'.<sup>11</sup>

Playing on Pole's denunciation of Jonson, Daniel Boughner dedicates a book-length study to Jonson's engagement with the Italian in *The Devil's Disciple: Jonson's Debt to Machiavelli*. As the title suggests, Boughner asserts an appreciable affinity between the two men, and points out that Jonson was 'well known early in his career as "Monsieur Machiavelli"'. Boughner argues further that "The close relationship invites the conclusion that if Machiavelli was the devil, then Jonson was the devil's disciple."<sup>12</sup>

This close ideological relationship between Jonson and Machiavelli seems to be substantiated by a shared acknowledgement of a significant discrepancy between the ideal and the actual, and places Jonson in the

<sup>10</sup> *Ben Jonson*, ed. Ian Donaldson, pp. 735–36.

<sup>11</sup> Phillip Lee Ralph, *The Renaissance in Perspective* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1974), p. 202. The following comment on Machiavelli by J.R. Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy* (London: The English Universities Press, Ltd, 1961), is just as applicable to Jonson's artistic approach: 'There were constants: human nature was one; the fact that similar situations recurred throughout history was another. Study could find them out' (p. 26).

<sup>12</sup> Daniel C. Boughner, *The Devil's Disciple: Ben Jonson's Debt to Machiavelli* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1968), p. 74.

same, or similar, camp as Machiavelli and other realists and pragmatists of the period who penetrated beyond the contemporary religious and classical ideals and evaluated assertions or situations "on-the-ground" solely by their practical consequences.<sup>13</sup>

Both Machiavelli and Jonson were products of societies that were becoming increasingly self-conscious and introspective with regards to their own conventions, institutions, ideologies, and largely unquestioned convictions.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Hiram Haydn is of the opinion that 'perhaps no other single characteristic of the Counter-Renaissance has so extensive an elaboration in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literature as the pragmatic emphasis of its empiricists upon the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual.'<sup>15</sup> This is in keeping with J.R. Hale's contention that Machiavelli 'lived in a generation that observed itself with more energy and objectivity than any since classical times.'<sup>16</sup> Raab makes a similar point in emphasising that the notable contribution of Machiavelli to socio-political debates of the time is precisely his interrogation of the widespread, complacent worldviews which, for the most part, 'consist of variations on a theological theme: the responsibilities of the prince *qua* Christian. No allowance is made for corruption, conflict of interests – in short, the complex realities of political life. The yawning gulf between *de jure* and *de facto* is as yet unbridged.'<sup>17</sup> That is, until Machiavelli and other realists of the time.

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<sup>13</sup> Felix Raab gives a detailed account of a growing acknowledgement and acceptance in England of this incongruity between an ideal religio-political state and a completely secular one divorced from considerations of divinely ordained sovereignty and the unquestioned corollary of the descending chain of being. See especially the first three chapters of *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

<sup>14</sup> Again, Raab is enlightening in this regard.

<sup>15</sup> Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), p. 227.

<sup>16</sup> Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Raab, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

While Machiavelli was attempting to analyse the lessons of history and the practice of contemporary politics in a more scientific manner, others, such as Sir Francis Bacon, Montaigne and Paracelsus, were advocating what was then a revolutionary approach to natural philosophy, medicine and chemistry, amongst other disciplines. In keeping with this empiricist approach, Jonson, too, attempted to make sense of the human condition through observation and direct interpretation. So, just as many of his contemporaries were exploring the frontiers of self and society, Jonson was utilising his particular skill and art to traverse the epistemological expanses in and through both his creative corpus and his non-dramatic texts.

Haydn goes on to explain that this realist attitude

rejects altogether the possibility of any realization of the ideal, which it completely divorces from the actual. On the one hand, it sees what ought to be, compounded of theory, hypothesis and fancy; and on the other, what is, consisting of practice, observation and fact. It either denies any reality to the former, or at least any value relevant to the living of life; it acknowledges the world of experience alone as real. Hence it distrusts intellectual knowledge and relies upon a radical empiricism.<sup>18</sup>

But this was not the exclusive domain of political writers and social critics. Rather, as Haydn insists, the motifs of the discrepancy between the hypothetical ideal and the experiential actual are treated extensively in the 'major imaginative literature of the period.'<sup>19</sup> Thus Felix Raab points out that

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<sup>18</sup> Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance*, p. 228.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228. Martin Fleisher, 'Trust and Deceit in Machiavelli's Comedies,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 365–380, also makes the point that 'Machiavelli's idea that the comic or the risible has its source in the incongruous and the inappropriate is of ancient lineage; it is the obverse of the classical idea of the wise man, the sage who knows what is right and fitting in every situation' (p.369).

The simplest, the most vocal and by far the most widespread reaction to the teachings of Machiavelli among Elizabethan Englishmen was horror, and the most spectacular manifestation of this horror – the loudest, and the one which most impressed contemporaries and later generations – was in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean drama. The Machiavellian villain strutted the stage in innumerable guises, committing every conceivable crime, revelling in villainous stratagem to the horrified enjoyment of audiences and the profit of theatrical entrepreneurs.<sup>20</sup>

While Jonson's plays certainly are politically charged, we may also turn to his prose commonplace *Discoveries*, where his invective bespeaks a deep disillusionment animated by his honest appraisal of the world as it really is, rather than as it ought to be:

Many men believe not themselves what they would persuade others; and less do the things which they would impose on others: but least of all know what they themselves most confidently boast. Only they set the sign of the cross over their outer doors, and sacrifice to their gut and their groin in their inner closets.<sup>21</sup>

Machiavelli makes an approximate observation in *The Prince*, where he avows:

[I]t appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of a matter than the imagination of it . . . because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live, that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli*, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> *Discoveries*, lines 51–56, p. 523.

<sup>22</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 83.

The overlap of the views of Jonson and Machiavelli concerning the nature of the relationship between the ideal(istic) and the real is thus very significant. Notwithstanding the earlier reference to his assertion of Jonson's intelligent engagement with Machiavelli, Parfitt advances the ambiguous view that Jonson 'continues throughout his career to labour to present an alternative to the world of *The Prince*'.<sup>23</sup> As I will attempt to demonstrate, this deduction seems somewhat simplistic and is premised upon a misconception of Jonson's relationship and response to Machiavelli. Although Jonson certainly offers an overt critical judgement of some of the Italian's maxims in his *Discoveries* (see below), there are intimations of a more covert concurrence with Machiavelli's general epistemological theories and his ideas on the individual's place and role within society, as evidenced in *The Alchemist*. This is hardly a far-fetched overlap, as both authors were intellectually vigorous and participatory in a milieu within which 'the perennial subject of discussion and inquiry was nothing less than the nature of man and his place in the universe'.<sup>24</sup>

So, although superficially it may seem that Jonson dismisses Machiavelli's tenets, there are telling instances of agreement which only become evident if one takes into consideration the broader intellectual context in which both were fashioning their ideas. This presupposes a conscious and meticulous ordering of action, characterization and plot structure on the part of Jonson within the context of the ideological climate fostered by Machiavelli. It precludes a complacent interpretation, on our part, which dismisses as mere coincidence what is more likely to be knowledgeable theoretical and artistic articulation.

In the *Discoveries*, Jonson engages directly with Machiavelli only once, where he states that:

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<sup>23</sup> Parfitt, *Ben Jonson*, p. 144.

<sup>24</sup> Ralph, *The Renaissance in Perspective*, p. 200.



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, Machiavel. 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 his clemency; and no glory is greater than to be able to save with his power . . . These are a prince's virtues; and they that give him other counsels are but the hangman's factors.<sup>25</sup>

This blatant refutation of Machiavelli may at first glance seem to corroborate Parfitt's reading. Yet when we examine what else Jonson says in the *Discoveries*, it becomes clear that his engagement with Machiavelli is not as clear-cut as Parfitt would have us believe. Jonson's seemingly unequivocal dismissal of Machiavelli is qualified by his candid and pragmatic appraisal of human existence. This cardinal trait is shared by the utilitarian and unsentimental Italian statesman, who pronounces that 'it appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of the matter than the imagination of it . . . because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live, that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation'.<sup>26</sup>

While Machiavelli conceded that the optimal way to self-knowledge and "truth" lay in the pursuit and practice of traditional Christian virtues, he was adamant that this was an impractical ideal in light of the everyday social and political realities.<sup>27</sup> He averred that success in the secular world

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<sup>25</sup> Ben Jonson, *Discoveries*, p. 552.

<sup>26</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 83.

<sup>27</sup> Thus, he writes 'I know that everyone will confess that it would be most praiseworthy in a prince to exhibit all the . . . qualities that are considered good; but because they can neither be entirely possessed nor observed, for human conditions do not permit it, it is necessary for him to be sufficiently prudent that he may know how to avoid the reproach of those vices which would lose him his state' (*Ibid*, p. 84).

demanded that people suspend their traditional values, and, instead, base their ethics and actions on the contingent circumstances in which they find themselves. Machiavelli had no illusions: from his perspective, the *potential* for good in man and nature was irrelevant. He warns that 'doing some things that seem virtuous may result in one's ruin, whereas doing other things that seem vicious may strengthen one's position and cause one to flourish.'<sup>28</sup> What matters, then, is not the abstract potential for good, but the *actuality* of a materialistic and egocentric world. Within this context, persisting in the pursuit of virtue in a world of vice is not only imprudent but also self-defeating. Thus Jonathan Dollimore argues that:

Machiavelli is concerned not with man's intrinsic nature, but with people in history and society . . . Such a perspective leads Machiavelli to account for man's acquisitiveness not in terms of his nature, but the individual's relative position in society.<sup>29</sup>

Although this may be seen as a pessimistic and cynical attitude, Rolf Soellner explains that:

Machiavelli thought of life as a warfare, a fundamentally different one [from the Christian humanists] . . . For the Christian humanist, man had to fight his baser instincts, his vices and passions, for Machiavelli, he had to fight against other men, body against body, mind against mind . . . individual success depended on the conquest of other, antagonistic selves rather than on the control of one's own self. Rules could be stretched or broken in emergency.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984), p. 171. Hale makes a similar point: 'Machiavelli's idea of human nature was . . . without illusions. Most men, he thought and observed, put self-interest first' (*Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, p. 14).

<sup>30</sup> Rolf Soellner, *Shakespeare's Patterns of Self-Knowledge* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1972), pp. 32–33.

The particular confrontational approach to life intimated here might, on the surface, seem not to dovetail with Jonson's averred aesthetic and philosophical principles of poetic justice. But in both his relationships with others and in his theatrical presentations it is precisely these Machiavellian attitudes and strategies that are foregrounded and validated.

When one reads *The Alchemist* and *The Prince* one after the other, or even in tandem, the ideological correlations between the two texts are interestingly highlighted. My intention, however, is not to propose a forced marriage between the two, but rather to raise some questions and to suggest possible answers about the apparent ambiguities and lacunae in Jonson's own overtly expressed opinions, and in some of the interpretations of the play, which either discount or minimise the relation of Jonson's work to issues treated by Machiavelli. Like the Italian, Jonson's individualism – some may say cynicism – results in a refusal to conform complacently to artificial patterns of dramatic depiction, that is, in a conspicuous challenge to traditional notions of poetic justice, which, for the most part, relied on the religiously symmetrical equations: good = reward; bad = punishment. Martin Fleisher makes a similar point about Machiavelli's cast of realism:

In Machiavelli's private world of the family, as in his public world of politics, we can find none of the old reference points – Stoic conscience, Epicurean pleasure principle, Christian faith – which serve to guide us to the right rules and limits of human conduct. Absent, too, from Machiavelli's world is the operation of a natural social sympathy or benevolence to account for the existence or preservation of family or city.<sup>31</sup>

Anne Barton points out that, 'Although an exponent of classical harmony, balance and restraint, Jonson all his life was drawn temperamentally towards

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<sup>31</sup> 'Trust and Deceit in Machiavelli's Comedies', p. 379.

what [Gerard Manley] Hopkins called “things counter, original, spare, strange.”<sup>32</sup> This conflict, played out in Jonson’s personal life and writings produced for the public, led, perhaps inevitably, to the inner turmoil, suggested by his persistent, yet largely unfulfilled, quest for the answers to life’s fraught questions, as evidenced by his lifelong religious vacillation.<sup>33</sup>

Given his basic commitment to honesty, Jonson, as playwright, cannot resist inviting his audiences to an encounter with the rough, haphazard and frequently bizarre actualities of daily existence. William J. Bouwsma makes it clear that ‘In a society fragmented by social change, theatre, dealing with common experiences and perceptions, also united people . . . This was especially valuable for the urban societies of the Renaissance, populated by alienated, disoriented, and anxious individuals.’<sup>34</sup> More than just representing life, theatre was believed to have a substantial effect on both the mind and the behaviour of audiences. Thus, ‘Theatre, by providing “a shared experience, mutually understood”, enables the isolated individual both to understand and, if only for a short time, to feel part of the world he or she inhabits.’<sup>35</sup>

This was, perhaps, especially true of comedy. The theory was that because comedy normally dealt with the affairs of ordinary folk, the didactic force would be felt across a wider spectrum of society and would

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<sup>32</sup> Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson: Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Jonson’s religious affiliations present a clear picture of a somewhat messy quest. Brought up as a Protestant, Jonson converted to Catholicism in 1598, while awaiting sentencing for killing a fellow actor. According to David Riggs, this conversion was ‘rash’ and ‘hard to fathom’, as Catholicism had to all intents and purposes become criminalized by this time. In 1605, Jonson asserted his loyalty to James I’s Protestant government by attempting to expose a Catholic priest suspected of involvement in the Gunpowder Plot. In 1610, Jonson’s decision to rejoin the Church of England was ambiguously manifested at his first communion service, where, as he reported to Drummond, ‘in token of true reconciliation, he drank out all the full cup of wine’. See David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 602.

<sup>34</sup> William J. Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance: 1550–1640* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 133.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

thus lead to a more effective and far-reaching reform. Jonson therefore maintains that

The parts of a comedy are the same with a tragedy, and the end is partly the same. For they both delight and teach; the comicks are called *didaskaloi*, of the Greeks, no less than the tragic . . . Nor is the moving of laughter always the end of comedy; that is rather a fowling for the people's delight, or their fooling.<sup>36</sup>

It seems to me that *The Alchemist* very eloquently sets forth this particular comedic perspective and, in addition, gives concrete expression to the Machiavellian theories of knowledge and power. According to F. H. Mares, 'The superiority of Subtle, Face and Dol – and it amounts to a moral superiority – is that they do not gull themselves. They have a firmer grip on reality than their dupes.'<sup>37</sup> This attitude towards themselves and their dupes may be said to epitomise the Machiavellian approach which advocates an objective appraisal of personal qualities, whether good or bad, and then judges how best to match one's disposition and propensity to the immediate contingencies. Thus Martin Fleisher asserts that 'To Machiavelli, wisdom appears to be the ability to understand the particular situation in which one finds oneself without being misled by wishes (*fantasie*) and to change one's way (*modo del procedure*) in order to exploit the situation in one's interest.'<sup>38</sup> Relevant to this is Haydn's comment on the faltering structure of Christian humanism, and how this effected a change of attitude towards previously inviolable "truths" and securities:

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<sup>36</sup> *Discoveries*, lines 2648–54, p. 589. Further, Mark Hulliung, 'Machiavelli's *Mandragola*: A Day and a Night in the Life of a Citizen', *The Review of Politics* 40.1 (Jan 1978): 32–57, maintains that 'The focus of the comic author is on the more mundane aspects of existence, on social, domestic, private and familial concerns' (p. 34). Unlike the great tragedies which focus on the lives of the socially elevated and (sometimes) morally heroic, comedy is motivated by non-extraordinary, everyday life.

<sup>37</sup> F.H. Mares (introd.), *The Alchemist*, by Ben Jonson (London: Methuen, 1971), p. xxxv.

<sup>38</sup> 'Trust and Deceit in Machiavelli's Comedies', p. 365.

Here is a world, like Montaigne's, ruled not by the known, unchanging and universal laws of a purposeful, God-guided nature, but a mutability dependent upon the indecipherable influence of the heavens – a world in which man's standards and customs and laws and institutions do not derive from fixed and permanent and venerable norms taking form from the nature and meaning of the universe, but rather from the peculiarities of time and locality and the shifting *mores* of men.<sup>39</sup>

These 'shifting *mores*' included a movement away from adherence to strict hierarchical codes and "birthrights" to the fostering of individualism, personal ambition, and self-fashioning. Face, Dol and Subtle evidently recognise and are prepared to take advantage of the contemporary preoccupation with self-advancement, which in turn led to a credulous acceptance by many of anything that promised a quick and easy route to fortune and fame. This, then, was an atmosphere in which fraudsters and swindlers thrived. Jonson's three protagonists show a peculiarly Machiavellian astuteness in cashing in on the proclivities of the times.<sup>40</sup>

Another important Machiavellian trait is adaptability, or flexibility, and Face, Subtle and Dol are nothing if not flexible. They are adept at carrying off the main deception of being masters of the esoteric arts of alchemy, astrology, numerology and necromancy, amongst others. Like consummate political animals, each of them is also skilled in the art of presenting the particular guise called for in any given situation.<sup>41</sup> If one accepts that "political" manoeuvring includes general strategies for gaining

<sup>39</sup> Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance*, p. 141.

<sup>40</sup> Hulliung points out that 'In the *Mandragola*, Machiavelli takes positive delight in the ways of immorality and communicates that delight to his audience with great artistry' ('Machiavelli's *Mandragola*', p. 41). The same could be said of Jonson's *The Alchemist*.

<sup>41</sup> This aptitude for disguise and dissociation is also applicable to *La Mandragola*, as Callimaco adopts the mask of a continentally successful doctor who has single-handedly ensured the royal lineage of France (*La Mandragola*, II.vi): text from '*The Servant of Two Masters' and Other Italian Classics*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Applause Theatre, 1986).

power, then Kerrigan's and Braden's explanation puts into perspective the Jonsonian trio's Machiavellian exploits: 'Politics in Machiavellian practice is pre-eminently a matter of the impression one makes on others, and the Prince's central resource – more fundamental than physical prowess or mastery at arms – is his ability to manage that impression at will.'<sup>42</sup>

The impressive rapidity with which different roles are assumed in *The Alchemist*, and the ability to juggle the numerous balls they have set in motion, demonstrates the quick-wittedness of the Venture Tripartite. This ability seems to epitomise what Kerrigan and Braden refer to as the Machiavellian 'Prince's essential *Kunst* as the art of theatrical performance, the ability to be wholly convincing in any number of assumed roles.'<sup>43</sup> Again, this chameleon trait fits with Machiavelli's philosophy of self-knowledge, for it demonstrates the ability to assess the circumstances accurately, and is testimony of the trio's preparedness to adjust and adapt their conduct according to shifting exigencies. Furthermore, the constant vigilance displayed by Subtle and Face is in keeping with Machiavelli's counsel:

[It] should be realized that all courses of action involve risks: for it is in the nature of things that when one tries to avoid one danger another is always encountered. But prudence consists in knowing how to assess the dangers, and to choose the least bad course of action as being the right one to follow.<sup>44</sup>

Face's achievements, especially, may be attributed to his insight into human nature and to his quick wit, which allows him to translate his knowledge into clear and precise strategy, and wholehearted deed in his "undercover"

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<sup>42</sup> William Kerrigan and Gordon Braden, *The Idea of the Renaissance* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 57.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>44</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 79.

work. This again accords with Machiavelli's caveat that 'foxiness should be well concealed: one must be a great feigner and dissembler. And men are so naïve, and so much dominated by immediate needs, that a skilful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived.'<sup>45</sup>

This insight proves to be invaluable to Face's continued survival and to his relatively easy "absolution" towards the end of the play, when his master returns unexpectedly to put a premature end to the schemes of the three tricksters. Face is swift and shrewd in his assessment of the situation and it is thanks to his cunning thinking and his quick action that he is able to turn a bad situation to his advantage. He not only manages to mollify his erstwhile companions by aiding and abetting their escape from the long arm of the law, but his (dis)ingenuous appeal to Lovewit's acquisitive nature and his show of contrition completely disarm his master. Face's sleight of hand is so successful that none of his accusers can make any specific charge stick to him. Indeed, Lovewit, apparently otherwise shrewd and perceptive, is so completely taken in by Face's version of events that he can defend his servant against vehement accusations with some conviction:

The house is mine here, and the doors are open:  
If there be any such persons you seek for,  
Use your authority, search on o' God's name.  
This tumult 'bout my door, to tell you true,  
It somewhat mazed me; till my man here, fearing  
My more displeasure, told me he had done  
Somewhat an insolent part, let out my house  
(Belike, presuming on my own aversion  
From any air o' the town while there was sickness)  
To a Doctor and a Captain; who, what they are,  
Or where they be, he knows not . . .<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 62.

<sup>46</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. Peter Bement (London: Routledge, 1987), V.v.26-37. This edition is used for all quotations from and references to *The Alchemist*.



If we are to see Dol, Face and Subtle as persuasive Machiavellian figures, how does Jonson invite us to assess their achievements, especially in relation to what those who desire poetic justice may see as the problematical denouement? One way of making sense of what seems to be Jonson's blatant flouting of accepted Christian humanist principles of balance, proportion, and justice may be to see the actions and the consequences of those actions within the context of his engagement with Machiavelli. The standards of Christian humanism dictate that as a man sows so also shall he reap. Yet Jonson's protagonists seem to get off almost scot-free, despite their dishonest, even heinous, treatment of the other characters. This may be clarified by reference to Dollimore's observation that:

Machiavelli demystifies man and society in at least three important respects: (1) politics is separated from morality; (2) both politics and morality are decontextualized from divine prescription; and (3) notions of essentialism are rejected, so that not only is the idealized human essence dispensed with, but the depraved one as well.<sup>47</sup>

In terms of Machiavelli's proposition of how the world works and how people attain and sustain success within that world, Jonson's ending does not seem preposterous, or even unexpected. Rather, the characters who display a measure of Machiavellian wit and self-knowledge are those who achieve the greater degree of "success" within a society which calculates success according to what one has, or has acquired, and what one gets away with. Those who through lack of self-knowledge allow themselves to be gulled by their street-smart contemporaries end up the poorer for their failure to assess their world and their place in that world correctly.

The themes dramatised in *The Alchemist* echo those of the earlier Machiavellian comedy, *La Mandragola*. There is convincing evidence that

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<sup>47</sup> Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 170.

both playwrights based their dramaturgical practices on classical theories of drama, and that both were serious in their exploration of the educative potential of comedy. Although different in context and content, it is interesting to note the conceptual similarities between Jonson's *The Alchemist* and Machiavelli's *La Mandragola*.

Like Machiavelli, Jonson firmly believed in the corrective potential of comedy, when it is framed as a mirror to reflect the follies, weaknesses, and absurdities of human existence and interaction.<sup>48</sup> The prologues to the respective plays demonstrate the shared appreciation of the corrective, didactic efficacy of wit and laughter to make a positive change to society. Jonson, therefore, states that:

But, when the wholesome remedies are sweet,  
And, in their working, gain and profit meet,  
He hopes to find no spirit so much diseas'd,  
But will, with such fair correctives, be pleas'd.  
(Prologue, 15–18)

In his Prologue, Machiavelli is tongue-in-cheek when he suggests that 'This comedy is not profound' (line 50) but goes on to lament that

This age to sour contempt is quicker,  
To twisted smile, malignant snicker.

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<sup>48</sup> Thus, Mark Hulliung notes that for Machiavelli 'as for the ancient dramatists, the purpose of art was civic education . . . Machiavelli's claim, explicitly stated in his *Dialogue on Language*, that a "useful lesson" is "the aim of comedy"' (*Machiavelli's Mandragola*, p. 34). In the same vein, Jonson asserts in his *Discoveries*: 'I could never think the study of wisdom confined only to the philosopher, or of piety to the divine, or of state to the politic. But that he which can feign a commonwealth, which is the poet, can govern it with counsels, strengthen it with laws, correct it with judgements, inform it with religion and morals, is all these' (lines 1043–48, p. 549). Furthermore, calling on the authority of classical writers to reinforce his advocacy of the eminence of the artist in society, he claims 'To nature, exercise, imitation, and study, art must be added, to make all these perfect . . . it is art only can lead him to perfection' (*Discoveries*, lines 2515–19, p. 586).

The virtues that did thrive of yore,  
D'you think we'll see them any more?  
(Prologue, 61–64)

– perhaps suggesting that this comedy might go some way in restoring the old virtues.<sup>49</sup>

The concurrence between Jonson and Machiavelli as playwrights is further established by Boughner, who enumerates the theoretical and practical criteria adhered to by both: they follow the comedic principle of focusing on the lives of the common people, in contrast to the tragic focal point of the rich and powerful aristocracy. Thus, while Machiavelli concentrates on a day in the lives of

An evil parasite . . .  
A scholar who is not too bright . . .  
A lover who is full of fight . . .  
A friar whose moral sense is slight . . .<sup>50</sup>

Jonson zooms in on the schemes of 'your whore, / Bawd, squire, imposter, many persons more'.<sup>51</sup>

Both authors employ elements of farcical high antics without succumbing to the lure of fatuous slapstick humour. In *The Alchemist*, our three protagonists are as eminently able as Callimaco and Ligurio in *La*

<sup>49</sup> Thus Charles S. Singleton, 'Machiavelli and the Spirit of Comedy', *Modern Language Notes* 57 (1942): 585–92, perceives that '[t]he *Mandragola* would seem to be comic in the sense of laughable by the super-imposition of the ridiculous on a world which is not ridiculous' (p. 585). See also Fleisher, 'Trust and Deceit in Machiavelli's Comedies', especially: '[A]lthough comedy must give pleasure through laughter, pleasure is only a means, a necessary means, but not its goal. The desire for pleasure draws people to a comedy, and laughter puts them in a receptive frame, but the end of comedy is to be found in the moral which it draws. Comedy, then, is didactic . . . comedy seeks to teach lessons useful to life (*l'esempio utile*) by holding up a mirror to domestic life' (p. 370).

<sup>50</sup> *La Mandragola*, Prologue, lines 43–46.

<sup>51</sup> *The Alchemist*, Prologue, lines 7–8.

*Mandragola* to manage the impressions they make on the various gulls, not only by adopting different physical disguises, but also the very personality to suit each contingency as it arises, and this under the most trying circumstances and within the tightest of time constraints. Sumberg makes a similar observation about *La Mandragola* that 'Action is rapid and the tension unrelieved. There is no rest for conspirators where life itself is at stake.'<sup>52</sup>

Both Jonson and Machiavelli emphasise the importance of plot structure, which must be characterised by the seamless combination of suspense and resolution in the unravelling of knotty complications.<sup>53</sup> In his *Discoveries*, Jonson makes the point explicitly:

Whole we call that, and perfect, which hath a beginning, a midst, and an end. So the place of any building may be whole and entire for that work, though too little for a palace. As to a tragedy or a comedy, the action may be convenient and perfect that would not fit an epic poem in magnitude . . . Therefore as in every body, so in every action which is the subject of a just work, there is required a certain proportionable greatness, neither too vast nor too minute.<sup>54</sup>

Also, both authors strive to be faithful to the classical dramatic unities of time, place and action.<sup>55</sup> In relation to the first unity, that of time, both authors limit the theatrical occasion to a temporal moment. Hulliung observes that 'In every way the *Mandragola* is cut from the cloth of ancient

<sup>52</sup> Sumberg, '*La Mandragola: An Interpretation*', p. 323.

<sup>53</sup> Boughner, *The Devil's Disciple*, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> *Discoveries*, lines 2728–41, p. 591.

<sup>55</sup> Singleton makes the point that 'one readily notices the strict observance which the play [*Mandragola*] seems to make of them [the unities]'. More particularly, he continues: 'The comedy is even explicit (with a smile) in its respect for uninterrupted action on a twenty-four hour basis . . . the unity of place . . . is strict, and being the usual *piazza* scene throughout . . . Unity of action must likewise be granted the play . . . the *Mandragola*, in the unilinear quality of its action, is outstanding among contemporary plays' ('Machiavelli and the Spirit of Comedy', p. 585).

Roman comedy . . . the action takes place within twenty-four hours, the order of the drama proceeds from *protasis* to *epitasis* to *catastrophe*, and all scenes are confined to a single street.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Jonson emphasises the real and dramatic articulation of 'these two short hours',<sup>57</sup> while all the action in *The Alchemist*, in compliance with the unity of place, is consigned to the interior of Lovewit's house or directly outside.

Another parallel between the plays is their focus on the immediate geographical, civilian (or national) locality, with which the respective audiences could readily identify. Thus, Jonson stresses that 'Our *Scene is London*, 'cause we would make known, / No country's mirth is better than our own. / No clime breeds better matter',<sup>58</sup> while Machiavelli insists that 'The story's good we'll tell to you' because 'It happened here. What's more: it's true. / Florence we'll show you now, your home; / Tomorrow, maybe, Pisa, Rome.'<sup>59</sup>

The similarities in the global plot structures are numerous: both plays focus on a small band of conspirators which is determined to enrich itself through fraud, deception and con-artistry; although the schemers work together, they are each pursuing his or her own advancement – hence the lack of trust amongst them; both conspiracies flout Christian humanist ideals by mocking conventional virtues of honesty, altruism and mutual regard; both playwrights employ elements of farce to effect their respective denouements; and both plays end on a tantalisingly ambiguous note.

There are also more particular comparisons which can be drawn. The conspiratorial relationships between Face and Subtle in *The Alchemist* and Callimaco and Ligurio in *La Mandragola* are politically fraught as it is difficult always to distinguish who is the leader. *The Alchemist* opens on

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<sup>56</sup> Hulliung, 'Machiavelli's *Mandragola*', pp. 33–34.

<sup>57</sup> *The Alchemist*, Prologue, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, Prologue, lines 5–7.

<sup>59</sup> *La Mandragola*, Prologue, lines 7–10.

an argument among the Venture Tripartite as to who between Face and Subtle can 'claim a primacy'.<sup>60</sup> Although Callimaco in *La Mandragola* sets the conspiracy in motion, he is totally reliant on Ligurio not only to bring it to fruition, but also to convince him constantly of the viability of the ruse.<sup>61</sup> Both these relationships beg the question "Who is the prince?" Perhaps the only answer, in Machiavellian terms, is that these political power affiliations are rarely, if ever, clear-cut and that the best policy would be to keep one's friends close and one's enemies even closer. Thus Machiavelli writes in *The Prince*:

And as experience shows, many have been the conspiracies, but few have been successful; because he who conspires cannot act alone, nor can he take a companion except from those whom he believes to be malcontents, and as soon as you have opened your mind to a malcontent you have given him the material with which to content himself . . . he must be a very rare friend, or a thoroughly obstinate enemy of the prince, to keep faith with you.<sup>62</sup>

Another interesting parallel between the plays is the use (or misuse) of titles and language in general. In *La Mandragola*, Nicia's gullibility is fostered by Ligurio's apparent flippancy with regard to the eminent Callimaco:

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<sup>60</sup> *The Alchemist*, I.i.131.

<sup>61</sup> Sumberg writes that 'Machiavelli takes pains to call attention to the limitations of Callimaco . . . He falters, stumbles, gets consumed in doubt and gives himself prematurely to despair for failure to see solutions at hand . . . Invariably it is Ligurio who sets him on the right track. He devises the final plan, improvises in the course of its execution and takes an increasing part in pulling it off' (*La Mandragola: An Interpretation*, p. 332). Timothy Lukes, 'Fortune Comes of Age', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 11 (1980): 33–50, goes so far as to identify Ligurio as 'the archetypal prince, by not allowing immoderate commitments to cloud his judgement [and] is quick to alter original plans in exchange for newer, more inventive ones' (p. 36).

<sup>62</sup> *The Prince*, p. 103.

Ligurio: Is Callimaco at home?  
 Siro: Yes, he is.  
 Nicia: Why don't you call him *Master* Callimaco?  
 Ligurio: Oh, he doesn't care about such trifles.  
 Nicia: Tsk, tsk, tsk. You must pay him the respect due to his profession: if he takes it amiss, so much the worse for him.<sup>63</sup>

A similar situation occurs in *The Alchemist* when Face's ostensible disrespect of the great doctor Subtle evokes from Dapper a heartfelt reproach: 'I'd ha' you / Use master Doctor with some more respect.'<sup>64</sup> Both the dupes – Nicia and Dapper – are “softened” by the con-artists' dexterity in saying exactly the opposite of what they mean, thereby manipulating perceptions. Again, this accords with Machiavelli's princely advice: 'But it is necessary to know well how to disguise this characteristic [faithlessness], and to be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are so simple, and so subject to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived.'<sup>65</sup>

The gulls in the respective plays are further stage-managed through the linguistic gymnastics practised by the imposters.<sup>66</sup> As predicted by Ligurio, Nicia becomes comically pliable as Callimaco carelessly throws about a few Latin phrases, Nicia exclaiming 'By the Holy Gospel, he's good!' and 'This is the most worthy man one could hope to find!'<sup>67</sup> Face and Subtle in

<sup>63</sup> *La Mandragola*, II.i.

<sup>64</sup> *The Alchemist*, I.ii.59–60.

<sup>65</sup> *The Prince*, p. 98.

<sup>66</sup> We have recourse to Montaigne's essay, 'Of the Vanity of Words', to corroborate the contemporary understanding of the power of words to manipulate the gullible: 'the stupidity and credulity we find in the common people . . . renders them liable to be handled and twisted by the ears by the sweet sound of this harmony [eloquence], without weighing it and knowing the truth of things by force of reason': Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. E.J. Trechmann (New York: Modern Library, 1946), Bk I, Chap. 51, p. 298.

<sup>67</sup> *La Mandragola*, II.ii.

*The Alchemist* also strategically deploy arcane Latin and alchemical terms to impress and swindle their dupes, the funniest instance being their demonstration of ‘heathen language’, which, Subtle foresees, ‘will fetch ’em, / And make ’em haste towards their gulling more.’<sup>68</sup> All the gulls in *The Alchemist* – Surly is the exception – are completely convinced not only to accept, but also to champion the wonder and validity of Subtle’s power. Although Subtle is never actually seen at work before the magic implements of his art, his and Face’s grasp of the mysterious and awe-inspiring *terminology* of the arcane arts exercises a mesmerising hold over the gulls. Like the example used by Machiavelli of Ferdinand of Aragon, who used the existence of entrenched religion together with people’s superstitions to advance his political cause, Subtle and Face use the mystery, wonder and language of magic to keep their subjects in a state of ‘suspense and admiration and occupied with the issue of them.’<sup>69</sup>

However, alchemical jargon and the illusion of alchemical process are not ends in themselves, but rather provide a specific paradigm within which Face, Subtle and Dol can explore and develop their own particular brand of Machiavellianism. From within this context, they can project their own form of magic on a less knowledgeable and more naïve world.<sup>70</sup> Far from being an elusive and illusory dream, alchemy for the trio becomes the clue along which they can trace their own transmutation from the base metal of disadvantage into the “pure” gold of a Machiavellian success story. They successfully shatter the moulds of socio-economic – and religious – predestination and manage to push back the horizons of their personal vistas. Alvin B. Kernan notes that Jonson’s protagonists are ‘portraits of Renaissance aspiration, of the belief that man can make anything he will of

<sup>68</sup> *The Alchemist*, II.v.87–88.

<sup>69</sup> *The Prince*, p. 124.

<sup>70</sup> In relation to *La Mandragola*, but equally applicable to *The Alchemist*, Sumberg notes that ‘This is the wizardry and the glory of fraud. It wins against all odds; it does the seemingly impossible’ (*La Mandragola: An Interpretation*, p. 321).



himself and of his world . . . Human nature and “remote matter” are considered by Jonson’s characters . . . as endlessly plastic . . .<sup>71</sup> Sumberg makes a similar point in relation to *La Mandragola*: ‘The moral is that man can make himself, given strong will and cleverness. He can cast off his providential destiny of always falling short of his goals. He would come into his own if he would but rely on himself.’<sup>72</sup>

Despite the setback of Lovewit’s unseasonable return in *The Alchemist*, the conspiratorial trio emerge relatively unscathed, unrepentant, and unpunished. Hulliung observes, in relation to *La Mandragola*, but equally germane to Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, that ‘It is Fortuna who upsets the best laid plans of mice and men in comedy as in real life; and it is Fortuna again who extricates connivers from the shambles of their schemes.’<sup>73</sup> One almost naturally presumes that with the invaluable experience gained, with the undoubted advantage of being willing to take the necessary risks within the imperfect world they inhabit, Face, Subtle and Dol will recover from the frustration posed by Lovewit’s return and continue to pursue their relatively profitable, though questionable schemes. They – and those like them – will, beyond the scope of the play, rise from the dross of their contemporaries to continue their pursuit and application of their Machiavellian philosopher’s stone.

The same could be said of Machiavelli’s *La Mandragola*, in which almost every character practises some form of fraud to further their various objectives – and gets away with it. Thus Hulliung makes the point that ‘as the *Mandragola* closes we learn that the transgressions of the past twenty-four hours will continue indefinitely.’<sup>74</sup> Like Jonson, Machiavelli does not

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<sup>71</sup> Alvin B. Kernan, ‘Base Metal into Gold’, in *Ben Jonson: ‘Every Man in His Humour’ and ‘The Alchemist’*, ed. R.V. Holdsworth, Casebook Series (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 171.

<sup>72</sup> Sumberg, ‘*La Mandragola*: An Interpretation’, p. 337.

<sup>73</sup> Hulliung, ‘Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*’, p. 47.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

allow the fraudsters to be punished, saving his most scathing though not unsympathetic indictment for the stupidity of Nicia, the banefully gullible and cuckolded husband.

Thus Fleisher suggests that, for Machiavelli, 'Resolution of conflicts, as often as not, involves real defeats and victories and not the reconciliation of differences.' Machiavelli suggests that deception and manipulation are acceptable means of attaining one's ends. This is highlighted at the denouement, when every character is left satisfied: Callimaco and Lucrezia are energised by the tonic of their illicit sexual affair; Ligurio has gained the comforts of home; Timoteo has his "blood money"; and Nicia remains blissful in his ignorance. Hulliung notes that 'When we attend a performance of *Mandragola*, we see that the immoralist is neither estranged nor a stranger; he is the neighbour next door, a citizen and fully aware of his citizenship.'

Both Jonson and Machiavelli seem to proffer under the guise of comedy a disenchanted, even self-interested, engagement with a less-than-perfect world, eschewing what they felt to be the often self-defeating dictates of Christian humanist moralism. Dollimore points out that 'By prising history free of providentialist ideology and conceiving it instead as radically contingent, Machiavelli intensified the conflict between religion and "policy".' The "smoke-and-mirrors" morality of *La Mandragola* seems to be echoed in *The Alchemist* as the characters of both Jonson and Machiavelli take a pro-active, utilitarian approach in creating their own destinies, instead of reaping what they sow in a kind of fatalistic religious sense.

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<sup>75</sup> Fleisher, 'Trust and Deceit in Machiavelli's Comedies', p. 373.

<sup>76</sup> Hulliung, 'Machiavelli's *Mandragola*', p. 42.

<sup>77</sup> That is, the simplistic religious equation: bad = punishment; good = reward.

<sup>78</sup> Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 12.