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### Di Maria, Salvatore. The Poetics of Imitation in the Italian Theatre of the Renaissance

Violetta Topoleva

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[See table of contents](#)

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**Di Maria, Salvatore.**

***The Poetics of Imitation in the Italian Theatre of the Renaissance.***

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. x, 222. ISBN 978-1-4426-7412-1 (hardcover) \$70.

The present book offers a thorough analysis of the following sixteenth-century Italian plays: Niccolò Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (ca. 1518) and *Clizia* (1525), Giovan Maria Cecchi's *Assiuolo* (1550), Luigi Groto's *Emilia* (1579), Giambattista Della Porta's *Gli duoi fratelli rivali* (1525?–1615), Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinthio's *Orbecche* (1541), and Lodovico Dolce's *Marianna* (1565). In the first chapter, while Di Maria provides a brief overview of the development of Italian Renaissance imitation of ancient Greek and Latin literary works, he suggests that this practice essentially inspired Italian Renaissance playwrights to compose original and modern plays. In his view, Italian Renaissance playwrights were able to do so not only by following closely the structure and form of classical plays or by extensively adapting plot material from classical literary works, but also by introducing into their plays innovations that reflected contemporary reality, which allowed their plays to appeal to wider audiences.

To demonstrate this fresh perspective on the Italian Renaissance plays, Di Maria examines each play by comparing it to its original sources in order to distinguish the author's treatment and alterations of the original source and to highlight the author's innovations in his own play. For instance, Machiavelli's *Clizia*, though closely resembling Plautus's *Casina* (185 BCE), offers different motives for the erotic pursuit. Unlike his ancestor whose infatuation with his young ward is driven by some perverted eroticism, Nicomaco's desire to satisfy his carnal desires with *Clizia* is caused mainly by a middle-age crisis. By altering the motives for the erotic pursuit, Machiavelli changes the comical representation of a lewd *amator senex* portrayed in Plautus's *Casina* into a dramatic representation of a middle-aged man wishing to stop the aging process. In

order to create a fictional world in which the audience would easily recognize its own society, morals, and sexual mores, Machiavelli enriched this play with fictitious Florentine characters and their surroundings. As Di Maria suggests, these changes indicate that imitation of classical literary works does not, by definition, restrict the production of modern and original plays.

To support his argument further, Di Maria examines Cecchi's *Assiuolo*, a play that, unlike Machiavelli's *Clizia*, borrows its plot material from several of Giovanni Boccaccio's tales, from Machiavelli's own plays, and, to some extent, from Plautus's comedies. Di Maria suggests that, in spite of such overt *contaminatio*, Cecchi's *Assiuolo* is an original play because it is peppered with new narrative functions and fresh meanings. In Cecchi's play, the two characters of the wife and the husband (an *amator senex*) engage (or seek to engage) in erotic extramarital relations, just like their prototypes in the original sources, but, unlike their prototypes, they do so for different reasons that are conditioned by current social norms and values. According to Di Maria, these different reasons make Cecchi's characters appear modern and appealing to sixteenth-century Italian spectators. They assume new qualities reflecting the social norms of a society in which they live. The introduction of characters with traits easily recognizable by the audience and the adaptation of plot material from various novelistic, classical, and contemporary sources make Cecchi's play appear both modern and original.

Di Maria's observations on the modernity and originality of the sixteenth-century Italian plays are based not so much on the notion that originality per se calls for the invention of new material but rather on the admiration of the creative skills of sixteenth-century Italian playwrights that allowed them to adapt and modify original sources so as to bring them in line with current, lived realities. In his view, the playwrights purposefully adapted plot material from other sources and enriched their theatrical works with references to current realities. These multilayered plays entertained, amazed, and spoke to contemporary audiences about themselves and their world.

Sixteenth-century spectators were immensely entertained by such plays for several decades, being able to recognize both the classical sources and their own world represented on stage. By the end of the century, however, tastes began to change, and interest in theatrical production shifted towards the *com-media dell'arte*.

Di Maria's study suggests that the success of the Italian Renaissance plays was conditioned not only by the playwrights' ability to use classical sources alongside sources drawn from the *novella* tradition and contemporary events, but also by their ability to represent current realities in a manner that was appealing to their spectators. This study, therefore, offers a fresh look at the poetics of imitation and reflects on-going scholarly interest in Italian erudite comedy.

VIOLETTA TOPOLEVA, *Brock University*