

Early Theatre

A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama



'My maine hope is, to begin the sport at Millaine': Italy in Philip Massinger's The Duke of Milan

Cristina Paravano 

Volume 26, numéro 1, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108220ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.26.1.5086>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

McMaster University Library Press / Becker Associates

ISSN

1206-9078 (imprimé)

2293-7609 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Paravano, C. (2023). 'My maine hope is, to begin the sport at Millaine': Italy in Philip Massinger's The Duke of Milan. *Early Theatre*, 26(1), 53–71.
<https://doi.org/10.12745/et.26.1.5086>

Résumé de l'article

Philip Massinger's *The Duke of Milan* (1621) clearly sits in the tradition of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Italianate tragedy and is resonant of stories, ideas, theories, and characters from Italian history and its literary tradition. This essay discusses the play as one of the earliest examples of Massinger's interest in Italy and its culture. It investigates the play's Italian setting and examines the influence of the Italian cultural and political legacy to offer new insights into the development of Anglo-Italian relations and England's home and religious politics in the early 1620s.

Cristina Paravano

‘My maine hope is, to begin the sport at Millaine’: Italy in Philip Massinger’s *The Duke of Milan*

Philip Massinger’s The Duke of Milan (1621) clearly sits in the tradition of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Italianate tragedy and is resonant of stories, ideas, theories, and characters from Italian history and its literary tradition. This essay discusses the play as one of the earliest examples of Massinger’s interest in Italy and its culture. It investigates the play’s Italian setting and examines the influence of the Italian cultural and political legacy to offer new insights into the development of Anglo-Italian relations and England’s home and religious politics in the early 1620s.

The depiction of Anglo-Italian relations on the English Renaissance stage has received ample scholarly attention. Yet not many scholars interested in this topic often consider Philip Massinger, even though he can be undoubtedly ascribed to the group of early modern English dramatists who were profoundly fascinated by Italy and its culture.¹ Massinger is of particular importance since his entire corpus resonates with stories, ideas, theories, and characters from Italian history and its literary and cultural tradition. Moreover, nine plays in his canon are set in Renaissance Italy.² This article discusses *The Duke of Milan* (1621) as one of the earliest examples of Massinger’s interest in Italy and its culture. It investigates the playwright’s portrayal of an Italian setting and, going beyond the traditional approach of source studies, it considers how Massinger re-elaborates Italian cultural elements and historical events in his Italianate revenge tragedy.³ Massinger looks at Italy through several literary and cultural filters: English and Italian historical and geographical accounts as well as the experience of his contemporaries, who set plays (specifically Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies) in an Italian setting. These filters reverberate in the text through the play’s two settings, Milan and Pavia, as well as the characters’ names.

Cristina Paravano (cparav@libero.it) is an adjunct professor of English language and literature at the University of Milan.

The Duke of Milan has not received much critical attention compared to other works by Massinger. Critical interpretations range from David L. Frost's view of the play as 'Massinger's most effective tragedy'⁴ to a play featuring 'a second-rate Othello ... a very shrewish Desdemona and ... a palpably poor Iago',⁵ as Arthur Symonds defined it.⁶ The play's Italian setting has even been dubbed as a poor example of local colour.⁷ Yet a more probing investigation of the ambiance and the discussion of the influence of the Italian cultural and political legacy offers stimulating insights into the development of Anglo-Italian relations on stage and a different perspective on England's home and religious politics in the early 1620s.

In the play, the lusty Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza, is so obsessively devoted to his wife Marcelia that, when he must leave to meet the emperor, he bids his favourite, Francisco, to kill her should he not return. Francisco promptly informs the woman of her husband's request, causing her to give him a cold welcome when he returns safely. Francisco then convinces the duke of his wife's unfaithfulness and leads him to murder her. In a scene reminiscent of Thomas Middleton's *Tragedy of a Tyrant and a Lady* (1611),⁸ Francisco appears disguised as a Jewish doctor, promising to bring the woman back to life; in actual fact, he simply paints her lips with poison, causing Sforza's death when he kisses her.

As the synopsis shows, *The Duke of Milan* sits in the tradition of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Italianate tragedy.⁹ The play combines several revenge tragedy tropes from a variety of plays, including the use of poison, acts of necrophilia, a Machiavellian avenger who disguises himself, and a lusty protagonist driven mad by his wife's murder. More precisely, the play dramatizes the story of Herod the Great (73–4 BCE) and his wife, Mariamne, as recounted by the Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities* and *Jewish War*, which Massinger presumably read in Thomas Lodge's translation (*The Famous and Memorable Works of Josephus*, 1602). The story, which was the source for at least seven other plays by 1622, features an authoritarian, jealous husband who leaves an order that his wife should be killed in the event of his death, and portrays the palace intrigues that lead to her murder.

Massinger makes several changes to the narrative. On one hand, he plunders *Othello*'s main storyline so that the shadow of Shakespeare's Venice looms large on Massinger's tragedy.¹⁰ On the other, he significantly alters the setting of the action in time and space, by relocating his play to sixteenth-century Northern Italy: his tragedy takes place in Milan, at Sforza's court, apart from a scene set in the imperial camp near Pavia.

The events portrayed in *The Duke of Milan* seem to be filtered through the prism of various texts from different periods so that we may observe a 'diachronic process of transtextuality, moving across genres and epochs despite national divides', as Michele Marrapodi puts it.¹¹ The playwright relies on the account of William Thomas, who illustrated his travels through Italy in his *Historie of Italie* (1549), Machiavelli's political philosophy, and Geoffrey Fenton's translation of Francesco Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia* (*The Historie of Guicciardini Containing the Warres of Italie and Other Partes*, 1579), which provides a detailed picture of the phase of the Italian wars between Francis I and the Emperor Charles V.¹² Within a highly specific historical framework, Massinger freely refashions characters, names, and events that encompass the battle of Pavia in 1525 and the reconciliation between the emperor and the Milanese Duke, Ludovico Sforza; the real-life duke who was defeated was Sforza's son Francesco II (1495–1535).

'The sack alone of Millaine will pay the Armie': The Geography of the Play¹³

The main setting of Massinger's tragedy is Milan, a fascinating Italian court, which was also an effective symbol of corruption, treachery, and moral decay in the early modern imagination. Milan was a well-known destination in Northern Italy for English travellers and a regular stopping place on the route taken by merchants. The city's prosperity made an impact on Fynes Moryson, who emphasized the wealth of 'Milan, called *la grande*',¹⁴ while William Thomas praised the elegantly rich clothes of the Milanese gentlewomen.¹⁵ The city had been used as a setting and is mentioned in several early modern plays; more than one Duke of Milan trod the boards of the English stage, from Shakespeare's Prospero in *The Tempest* (1611) to the eponymous ruler in Dekker's *2 The Honest Whore* (1605).¹⁶ Besides Dekker's comedy, other plays set more or less entirely in Milan are Jonson's *The Case is Altered* (1597), Middleton's *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (1621), Nathan Field's 'The Triumph of Love' (1613, one part of *Four Plays, or Moral Representations, in One*), which he co-wrote with Fletcher, and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613).¹⁷ Interestingly, only Webster tried to exploit Milan's potential as a setting in a tragedy, while the other early modern dramatists tended to associate the city with more tragicomic or even comic atmospheres and tones.

When Massinger chose Milan as a setting for his revenge tragedy, he drew the audience's expectations about the use of an Italian court as the most suitable location for a ruler's personal abuse of power. Moreover, he capitalized on Milan's

history of political instability and early modern reports which depicted it as a city in a region 'infamous for murders', to borrow Moryson's words.¹⁸

In the tragedy, Milan stands as a den of liars, poisoned by corruption and immorality and governed by intrigue. These aspects are also enhanced in Massinger's play by the characters' names, most of which recur in other plays from the period set in Italy, such as Webster's *The White Devil* (1612, Francisco, the courtier Giovanni,¹⁹ and Isabella, the duke's mother), and Marston's *The Insatiate Countess* (1610, Medina and Isabella). The latter is an emblematic case: Isabella has a historical counterpart in Duke Francesco II's mother, yet the name is very common on the early modern stage since it appears in a number of plays set in Italy, especially tragedies where lust stands centre stage: for example, Fletcher's tragicomedy *Women Pleased* (1620), Middleton's *Women, Beware Women* (1621), and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604), which is formally set in Vienna but has a strong Italian flavour.²⁰

Besides Milan, the play features a scene at the emperor's camp near Pavia. Unlike the historical duke of Milan who was in league with the emperor, Massinger's duke is a faithful supporter of the French monarch. Nevertheless, when he offers his allegiance to the emperor, he convinces the latter of his nobility and honesty so that he is forgiven and confirmed as ruler of the city. The scene is closely based on Guicciardini's account of the meeting between Sforza and Charles V in Bologna, which the playwright moves to Pavia in the immediate aftermath of the battle. This choice seems to confirm the character's will and necessity to mend relations with the emperor at the earliest opportunity.

Pavia maintains some connections with Italianate revenge tragedy since the city was used as one of the settings of *The Insatiate Countess*.²¹ This association provided Pavia with a gloomy allure that a city like Bologna, celebrated for its university, did not have. Massinger must have known Fletcher's *The Chances* (1617), whose scene is laid in Bologna. In the play, Don John praises the civil order of the place: 'The civill order of this Towne *Bellonia* / Makes it belov'd, and honour'd of all travellers, / As a most safe retirement in all troubles; / Beside the wholesome seat, and noble temper / Of those mindes that inhabit it, safely wise, / And to all strangers vertuous' (1.3.1–6).²²

The scene set near Pavia provides a resolution to the conflict between Sforza and the emperor, thus adding temporary relief to the development of the story. The city seems to acquire a more positive connotation because it may reflect the virtuous behaviour of the Spanish emperor, who proves wise and longsighted and eventually forgives his enemy. The setting seems to bring about a transformation in Sforza, who stands out as a leader, ready to die but willing to save his people

in Milan by appealing to the emperor's mercy. Faced with the Spanish ruler, the duke is surprisingly eloquent, an eloquence that recalls Othello when he speaks in front of the Venetian council to defend himself from Brabantio's accusations. Thus, the image of Shakespeare's Venice in *Othello* seems to be superimposed on that of Pavia. When the duke of Milan makes his plea to the emperor, he manages to save his life, his crown, and his subjects:

Nor come I as a Slaue,
Piniond and fetterd, in a squallid weed,
Falling before thy Feet, kneeling and howling,
For a forestal'd remission; That were poore,
And would but shame thy victorie: For conquest
Ouer base foes, is a captiuitie,
And not a triumph. I ne're fear'd to dye,
More then I wish'd to liue. (3.1.149–56)

We find an echo of Othello's words 'Rude am I in my speech' (*Oth* 1.3.81)²³ in Sforza's 'nor come I as a slave', two examples of rhetorical strategies that emphasize the dignity of the characters as if their eloquence were the expression of the character's nobility. Sforza's oratorical strategies win the sympathies of the Spanish captains and conquer the emperor, who is somehow so bewitched by the duke's words that he claims: 'Thou hast so farre / Outgone my expectation, noble *Sforza*' (*Duke of Milan*, 3.1.196–7). Yet Sforza's nobility and moral rectitude are an illusion, and his plea to the emperor is like 'a pageant / To keep us in false gaze' (*Oth* 1.3.19–20), to say it with the words of a Venetian senator: as soon as Sforza has succeeded and is ready to come back to Milan, he is turned into a weak, insignificant, and dismissive character by the mere thought of Marcelia.

Sforza confronts the emperor on the advice of the marquis of Pescara, one of the few historical characters in the play. Fernando Francesco De Avalos, Marquis of Pescara, was the Italian chief commander of the Habsburg armies of Charles V, especially known for his decisive role in the Spanish victory at Pavia. As a historical character, Pescara also appears in *The Duchess of Malfi*. In both plays, he is accorded respect due to his ethics, integrity, and sensitivity, as well as his ability to solve complex political issues, such as the reconciliation of the emperor and Sforza, a diplomatic triumph on his part.

Within Massinger's output, *The Duke of Milan* is the only play providing such a depreciative image of Italy, apart from *The Double Marriage* (1622, with Fletcher), set at the court of the lustful Neapolitan King Ferrand. In the early 1620s Massinger's tragedies offer a vision of Italy that is rooted in the Elizabethan

and early Jacobean mode of portraying the country. His following plays set in Italy, instead, are comedies or tragicomedies, which enabled Massinger to provide a more favourable depiction of the country that goes beyond the simplistic constructs of imitation and xenophobia. Italy thus becomes the arena where pressing religious and political conflicts may find a solution, and even unworthy and morally questionable characters are given the chance to redeem themselves.

'A supposed Duke of Millaine': Re-Envisioning History

In Massinger's tragedy, the Milanese setting is never described, but court life is delineated so to 'show us a way of life, not a place',²⁴ as Robert C. Jones contends. The city is strongly associated with its political leader, Ludovico Sforza (1452–1508), a man who fascinated early modern English dramatists. The duke was one of the best-recognized members of the notorious Sforza family. He assumed the regency of the duchy of Milan for his seven-year-old nephew Gian Galeazzo in 1476, when Galeazzo Maria Sforza — Ludovico's brother — was murdered.²⁵ In his *History of Italy*, Guicciardini pointed to Ludovico Sforza to exemplify the damage caused by narcissism and selfishness since the duke's egotism ruined 'the whole Italian nation when he called in the French to assist his own private usurpation'.²⁶ Emperor Maximilian I legitimized Sforza's actions in 1494, bestowing upon him the title of duke of Milan. The *Dramatis Personae* of the play identifies Sforza as 'a supposed Duke of Millaine', a definition that seems to prove that Massinger was well acquainted with that specific historical background.

The dramatist intentionally fashions a protagonist who is rooted in history even though his portrayal is not historically accurate. Massinger's approach is therefore dictated by a specific dramatic necessity: a controversial historical protagonist such as Ludovico Sforza substantiates the depiction of Massinger's leading character as a morally ambiguous and unscrupulous ruler, driven by his thirst for power and his ambition. However, the character also simultaneously reinforces suggestively the bond between Othello and the duke, since Ludovico Sforza was nicknamed 'the Moor' owing to his dark complexion.

Another aspect of the history of Milan that emerges from early modern accounts is its political instability. Ortelius writes that 'The citie of *Milan* is the chief of all citties of this duchie, & hath bene euen the balke of fortune to bee tossed & transposed to & from so many commaunders'.²⁷ In Massinger's play Milan emerges as a city-state governed by an unwise ruler, more devoted to the satisfaction of his sexual desires than to the protection of his citizens. The damage caused by the irresponsible government was aptly discussed by Machiavelli. Massinger was

acquainted with Machiavelli's works and political thought; he relied on *Istorie fiorentine* (translated by Thomas Bedingfield in 1595) for *The Fair Maid of the Inn* (1626, co-written with Webster, Ford, and Fletcher) and *The Prince* (1513) for *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1625) and *Believe As You List* (1631).²⁸ In the early modern period, Machiavelli's treatise was considered the political and cultural epitome of the vices and the lack of scruples of Italian politics. In *The Prince*, the Florentine political philosopher accused Italian princes, like the Duke of Milan Ludovico il Moro (Lodovick the Moor), of indolence:

E se si considerà quelli signori che in Italia hanno perduto lo stato ne' nostri tempi, come el re di Napoli, duca di Milano e altri, si troverà in loro, prima, uno comune difetto ... Questi nostri principi, e' quali erano stati molti anni nel loro principato, per averlo di poi perso non accusino la fortuna ma la ignavia loro: perché non avendo mai ne' tempi quieti pensato ch'e' possino mutarsi — il che è comune difetto degli uomini, non fare conto nella bonaccia della tempesta- quando poi vennono e' tempi avversi pensorno a fuggirsi, non a defendersi.²⁹

[And if one considers those rulers in Italy that have lost their states in our times, such as the King of Naples, the Duke of Milan, and others, one discovers in them, first, a common defect ... these princes of ours who have been in their municipalities for many years, and who have then lost them, must not blame fortune but rather their own idleness; for, never having thought in peaceful times that things might change (which is a common defect in men, not to consider in good weather the possibility of a tempest), when adverse times finally arrived they thought about running away and not about defending themselves.]³⁰

Michael Redmond applies Machiavelli's ideas to *The Tempest* and asserts that 'The accusation of indolence against the deposed princes of Milan and Naples recalls Prospero's regrets about how his own self-indulgence and disregard of "worldly ends" precipitated the *coup d'état* which deprived him of his dukedom'.³¹ At the same time, Machiavelli's words can be applied to Sforza, who is seen by his enemies as 'too much a Soldior, / Too confident of his owne worth, too rich' (3.1.54–5). He is an authoritarian, despotic ruler who avoids taking responsibility for the government of his court.

Massinger even exploits the Machiavelli-inspired storm imagery through this filter of *The Tempest*, in which the issues of usurpation, revenge, and power are intertwined with the authoritative image of the usurped duke of Milan. The word 'tempest' recurs three times in Massinger's tragedy. The first occurrence

is in 2.1.185–7, when Francisco inquires about the women's complaints about Marcelia: 'What winde hath rais'd this tempest? / Seuer 'em, I command you. What's the cause? / Speake *Mariana*'. For the duke's favourite, the women's reaction is 'a tumult in the court' (2.1.184). Their opposition seems to take the form of political upheaval of noble subjects against a proud duchess, who arrogantly considers other women as vassals. The word is employed again later when the duke is convinced of Marcelia's unfaithfulness and reacts angrily. The courtier Tiberio expresses his astonishment at such an unpredictable and brutal response by claiming: 'But 'tis a tempest on the suddaine rays'd, / Who durst haue dreamt of?' (4.3.248–9). Remarkably, when Massinger uses the word to refer to Sforza, the term loses all political connotations and conveys the idea of a sentimental and emotional outburst, which corresponds to the duke's temperamental character. The most significant occurrence follows the confrontation between Sforza and the emperor. When the marquis of Pescara hears that the duke has been allowed to maintain his role, he has recourse to the same image: 'So Sir, this tempest is well ouerblowne, / And all things fall out to our wishes' (3.1.248–9). Pescara's words implicitly suggest that once Sforza takes his full responsibility, he is no longer the indolent ruler blamed by Machiavelli, but grows resourceful and capable of overcoming even the most dangerous situation and surviving a rapid change of fortune.

Another face of the court of Milan is represented by the deceitful Francisco, one of the numerous stage representations of George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham. Francisco is diabolically inventive, 'a vicious Machiavel', as Ira Clark defines him,³² who has deservedly earned a place among the Machiavellians that infested the early modern English stage. His name recurs in plays of the period, such as *The Case is Altered*, likewise set in Milan, and *The White Devil*. It may not be a coincidence that he bears a Spanish-sounding name, like his Shakespearean counterpart, thus strengthening the bond with the diabolic villain.³³ His name may also recall the years of Spanish rule over the dukedom of Milan while casting an unfavourable light on this character, who is implicitly associated with the 'Spanish pride' (1.1.74) so hateful to Sforza. Moreover, it may obliquely suggest Francisco's undisclosed grudge against Sforza, a feeling which is shared by his sister Eugenia, a young woman seduced and abandoned by the duke to marry Marcelia, whose name mostly appears in plays set in Spain. On the other hand, we must remember that the historic Milanese duke of the battle of Pavia was called Francesco II. Naming the villain of the play Francisco thus makes Sforza's definition of his favourite as his 'second selfe' even more disturbing (4.3.71). Linda Woodbridge sees Massinger's play as 'manically symmetrical'.³⁴

The two characters seem to follow devious parallel paths which bring them both to damnation because of their lust. Francisco is similar but also complementary to Sforza, since he embodies other popular practices and vices which were attributed to Italian courts in the early modern age, such as the recourse to poison, lies, and intrigue as *modus operandi*.

Nevertheless, Sforza's Milan not only emerges as a Renaissance court but also has some traits of the Roman imperial court. As Domenico Lovascio remarks, Massinger had genuine 'enthusiasm for classical antiquity',³⁵ which he explored in *The False One* (with Fletcher in 1620), *The Virgin Martyr* (with Dekker in 1620), *The Prophetess* (with Fletcher in 1622), and *The Roman Actor* (1626). Alongside names commonly used in Italianate plays, such as Giovanni, Stephano, Alphonso, and Mariana, some names explicitly point to the Roman past, especially to the darkest pages of its history: for instance, Tiberio and Graccho combined together, turn into Tiberius Gracchus (ca. 163–33 BCE), the Roman tribune murdered in a riot. Moreover, Tiberio may also evoke the story of Emperor Tiberius, whose name is inextricably linked to the name of his favourite, the unscrupulous Sejanus. Massinger's description of court intrigues seemingly alludes to imperial Rome and is indebted both to Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall* (1603) and Tacitus's *Annals*.³⁶ In the following scene, the duke's mother and sister complain about the way Sforza favours the proud Marcelia:

MARIANA I will not goe, I scorne to be a spot
In her proud traine.

ISABELLA Shall I, that am his mother,
Be so indulgent, as to waite on her,
That owes me duty?

FRANCISCO Tis done to the *Duke*,
And not to her. And my sweet wife remember,
And Madam, if you please receiue my councell,
As *Sforza* is your sonne, you may command him,
And as a sister you may challenge from him,
A brothers loue, and Fauour: But this graunted,
Consider hee's the *Prince*, and you, his Subiects. (1.2.1–10)

Massinger's depiction of court politics, based on a contentious pursuit of personal advantage, seems to have a Tacitean flavour. In this scene, Massinger seems to offer the first dramatization in his corpus of Tacitus's description of the meeting between Agrippina and Livia after Augustus's death in *Annals* (1.33). Massinger probably reworked this description later in his career in *The Roman Actor*

(1.4.1–13), when each imperial woman tries to underscore her own superiority and attempts to appeal to the emperor's benevolence. While in Massinger's Roman tragedy *Caenis*, Domitilla, and Julia (respectively Vespasianus's former mistress, Domitian's cousin, and his niece) protest being 'vassals to a proud woman' (4.1.72) like Domitia, Caesar's wife, in *The Duke of Milan*, Isabella and Mariana complain about their submissive role. The similarities here, particularly in the portrayal of female characters, may suggest that when Massinger wrote his Italianate tragedy, he had in mind the myth of Rome. Marcellia is drawn as the epitome of pride, beauty, and lust. The playwright fittingly compares her with Poppaea (2.1.37), the wife of Emperor Nero, notorious for her beauty and her sexual voracity, Cleopatra (39), and Messalina (4.3.102), the classical personification of depravity and dissolution.

'Haue giuen thee poison': Poison and Religion

Massinger's tragedy relies on the negative image of Italian courts and the association between Italy and poison, 'the traditional means of Italian vengeance', as Fredson Bowers points out,³⁷ and the 'quintessentially popish crime',³⁸ according to Alastair Bellany. The connection between Italy, poison, and Catholicism was firmly established in the early modern period. Morison explains that:

For poysons the Italians skill in making and putting them to vse hath beene long since tried, to the perishing of kings and Emperours by those deadly potions giuen to them in the very Chalice mingled with the very precious blood of our Redeemer ... In our tyme, it seems the Art of Poysoning is reputed in Italy worthy of Princes practice.³⁹

The presence of poison on stage acquired strong political implications, especially when associated with court intrigue, Machiavellian dissimulation, and a court favourite as a revenger. As Bellany observes, stories of poisonous favourites on stage generated 'anxieties about how power and favour were obtained at court',⁴⁰ especially at the Stuart court after Thomas Overbury's scandal in 1613, and the numerous poisoners in early modern drama were 'key barometers of a society's cultural', political, and religious anxieties.⁴¹

The recourse to poison was commonly used in diverse Italianate revenge tragedies, such as Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda* (1588), *The White Devil*, and *Tragedy of a Tyrant and a Lady*, on which Massinger draws explicitly, but also in Roman plays such as *The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero* (1607).⁴² In his exploitation

of a popular device such as poison, Massinger combines different approaches. As in *Othello*, Francisco pours metaphorical poison in Sforza's ear and convinces him of his wife's adultery. After Marcelia's death, Francisco turns to real poison to complete his revenge. When he succeeds in his plan and he sees Sforza murdering his own wife, he leaves the court abruptly.

Once he reappears on stage, Francisco disguises himself as a 'A Iew by birth, and a Physitian / By his profession' (5.2.75–6)⁴³ like Romelio in Webster's *The Devil's Law-Case* (1618), who bears some traits of the 'Machiavillain' (*The White Devil* 5.3.193).⁴⁴ The same correlation between Jewish doctors and Machiavelli was drawn by William Harvey. In his marginal notes to a pamphlet against Jewish physicians (George Meier of Würzburg's *In Iudaeorum Medicastrorum Calumnias et Homicidia*, 1579), he claimed that 'Egregia perfidia Iudaeorum facit pro Machiavelli politica' [the matchless perfidy of the Jews creates politics of a Machiavellian nature].⁴⁵ Therefore Francisco's disguise as a Jewish physician reinforces the diabolic and Machiavellian spirit of his character while feeding the audience's uneasiness and prejudice towards the Jews. As Jonathan Harris explains, 'it was believed that Jewish physicians possessed unique, semimagical power to cure sick patients'.⁴⁶ Yet Francisco does not offer his supposed expertise to cure Marcelia but to heal Sforza from his frenzy by making him believe that his wife is still alive. As in *Tragedy of a Tyrant and a Lady*, Francisco paints Marcelia's face and convinces the duke that she is still living. After Sforza kisses the corpse, Francisco takes off his disguise to rejoice at the imminent death of his enemy.

'The erotic investment in a corpse that leads to the poisoned kiss', Tanya Pollard notes, 'is depicted as an extension of a prior obsession with the woman herself'.⁴⁷ Sforza is obsessed with Marcelia even after her death, which proves that his lust has no limits. Sforza's approach to his wife reflects their relationship in life since he invests her dead body with passive subjectivity as in life, so necrophilia exemplifies Sforza's obsession and his idolatry for Marcelia. As Mariangela Tempera argues, idolatry was stigmatized as a 'much-deplored practice of Italian Catholicism'.⁴⁸ It was judged very severely in the Protestant doctrine: the veneration of idols was thought to be a strongly eroticized dimension and, as Susan Zimmerman asserts, 'Protestant reformers were quick to exploit the exegetical tradition that connected the worship of false gods to lustful appetite'.⁴⁹ The issue of idolatry runs through the entirety of *The Duke of Milan*. While preparing for the celebration of Marcelia's birthday at the beginning of the play, Sforza's mother states: 'let us to the banquet; / But not to serve his idol'; even Sforza himself acknowledges that he 'might have fall'n into idolatry' (1.3.35–6; 4.3.50).

Both Sforza and Francisco are concerned about their afterlife. The duke's favourite scorns his punishment and, unlike Iago, Francisco's malignity is not motiveless since he has avenged his sister's honour, who had been seduced and abandoned by Sforza to marry Marcelia. While Iago takes refuge in silence, Francisco is willing to explain his motives and intentions: 'I made thee doe a deed heauen will not pardon / Which was to kill an innocent' (5.2.229–30). While the duke's name is irremediably tainted with infamy, Francisco, instead, will be remembered among those who took justice into their own hands. Nevertheless, far from being a pure agent of justice, Francisco has become as corrupt as those he wished to reform.

This scene offers many insights into the religious practices of the obsequies of the dead and the notion of Christian afterlife. Sforza thinks about what will happen to him once he is dead, but his views are blurred. His uncertainty places him in a sort of liminal space. Sforza feels he is doomed to hell, as Francisco suggested:

And for that dog *Francisco* (that seduc'd me
In wounding her to rase a temple built
To Chastitie and sweetnesse) let her know
I'll follow him to hell, but I will find him,
And there Hue a fourth fury to torment him. (5.2.121–5)

And later, facing his enemy, he claims:

O now I feele
An *Ætna* in my entrailes! I haue liu'd
A Prince, and my last breath shal be commaund.
I burne, I burne, yet ere life be consum'd
Let me pronounce vpon this wretch all torture
That witty cruelty can inuent. (245–50)

Sforza feels the burning fire of his lust for Marcelia's body, an unrestrained desire that does not diminish even at her death; the image foreshadows the blazing flames of hell while suggesting the corrosive effects of poison. References to Mount Aetna, an active volcano in Sicily, popularly known as the mouth of hell, were common in early modern English drama, especially in revenge tragedies, such as Marston's *The Insatiate Countess* and *Antonio's Revenge* (1600), Chapman's *Bussy D'Amboise* (1604), and Henry Chettle's *The Tragedy of Hoffman* (1603), in which Otho cries in anguish: 'I feel an Etna burn / Within my brains' (1.2.218–19).⁵⁰

Sforza hints at two different scenarios after his death. The reference to his ashes adumbrates the annihilation of the body and of the individual under the

influence of the doctrinal changes enacted during the Reformation, which multiplied anxiety about what happens after death.⁵¹ At the same time, he points to the more comforting image of the Catholic purgatory, the existence of which had been officially abolished in England in 1563:

I come death, I obey thee,
 Yet I will not die raging, for alas,
 My whole life was a phrensie. Good *Eugenia*
 In death forgiue me. As you loue me beare her
 To some religious house, there let her spend
 The remnant of her life, when I am ashes
 Perhaps shee'll be appeas'd, and spare a prayer
 For my poore soule. Bury me with *Marcelia*
 And let our Epitaph be — (5.2.256–64)

The duke suggests that Eugenia should choose a monastic life, a path that was no longer viable in Reformed England, which had seen the dissolution of monasteries between 1535 and 1539 but was a common choice in Renaissance Italy. Sforza feels unworthy of heaven but may presume that his contrition for Marcelia's murder and Eugenia's mistreatment may open the doors of purgatory to him and Eugenia's prayer may contribute to abridge his stay in that place of penitence and transition.

According to Thomas Rist, revenge tragedies associate the notion of remembrance of the dead and the void left by the suspended Catholic rituals with some controversial features. As he claims, 'the Latinate surroundings of the dramatic memorials — including an Italian or Spanish setting — suggest Catholic focus (though not, as yet, Catholic sympathy)'.⁵² For other scholars, like Ronald Broude and Wendy Griswold, the depiction of court corruption in continental countries, usually Catholic, is meant to be anticatholic and support 'the lasting establishment of English Protestantism'.⁵³

Yet the play is ambiguous since it neither endorses Catholic sympathies nor opposes them. It rather alerts the audience to religious differences and the anxiety caused by thoughts about the afterlife. Massinger skillfully sets his tragedy in a country where Catholicism is the dominant belief so that Sforza's hint at purgatory is justified and at a time when the English Reformation had not yet started and Henry VIII was still 'defensor fidei'. Yet Sforza himself is not convinced he will be redeemed. He is still fully connected to his earthly life since he asks to be buried with Marcelia, not an unusual request, but a final attempt at maintaining possession of her body. Pescara is the one who holds the moral compass

and explains what kind of moral teaching should be learned: 'ther's no trust / In a foundation that is built on lust' (5.2.269–70). His moral tag does not refer only to the lust that drove the protagonists but acquires a larger significance if we look at lust in terms of thirst for power, prestige, and influence, 'which provides the foundation for the verbal encounters between the characters, for their distorted personal and familial relationship, and for their corruption of language'.⁵⁴

In *The Duke of Milan*, Massinger's Milan emerges as the perfect setting for violence, viciousness, and lust. The playwright plays on the peculiarity of the genre of the revenge tragedy in terms of motifs, themes, and setting by writing a play that is like an anthology of the most successful moments of Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies. Even though his play is inevitably indebted to previous Italianate works, it offers a clever example of skillful dramaturgy in an Italian setting. Massinger exploits the tragic potential of the court of Milan, which becomes the epitome of continental court corruption and vice, and a screen on which he can project political and religious concerns that were topical under the reign of James I. The playwright takes advantage of the rich history of the city pointing to different aspects simultaneously: Milan is a wealthy and powerful Renaissance city-state with strong Roman roots and an important centre of political and religious power. The setting of the play in a Catholic country such as Italy makes the protagonist's reflection on his afterlife much more intriguing, suggesting the complexities and the diverging opinions in the religious and doctrinal debates raging on in Stuart England.

In the rest of his canon, Massinger distances his plays from the model offered by the Italianate revenge tragedy and delineates an increasingly more benevolent image of the country. Towards the end of his career, he brings on stage another duke of Milan in *The Bashful Lover* (1636), his last extant play set in Italy: this time he portrays the tragicomic vicissitudes of the virtuous Galeazzo, who enhances a more positive illustration of Milan, as a place which is far from the gloomy, superbly rich, and authoritarian city depicted in *The Duke of Milan*.

Notes

- 1 Even in *The Routledge Research Companion*, edited by Michele Marrapodi, which offers an authoritative review of the current state of the art of Anglo-Italian studies, Massinger is mentioned only passingly. See Janet Levarie Smarr, 'Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Theatricality', in *The Routledge Research Companion to Anglo-Italian Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (London, 2019), 75–100, 89, and 90, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315612720>.
- 2 Four collaborative works — *The Custom of the Country* (1619), *The Double Marriage* (1622), *A Very Woman* (1623, rev in 1634), and *The Fair Maid of the Inn* (1626) — and five solo plays, namely *The Duke of Milan* (1621), *The Great Duke of Florence* (1627), *The Maid of Honour* (1630?), *The Guardian* (1633), and *The Bashful Lover* (1636). The date limits for all the plays mentioned are those provided by Martin Wiggins, in association with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, 11 vols (Oxford, 2012–).
- 3 Michele Marrapodi, ed., 'Appropriating Italy: Towards a New Approach to Renaissance Drama', in *Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Rewriting, Remaking, Refashioning* (London, 2007), 1–51, 3, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315251707>.
- 4 David L. Frost, *The School of Shakespeare: The Influence of Shakespeare on English Drama 1600–1642* (Cambridge, 1968), 112.
- 5 Arthur Symons, ed., *Philip Massinger* (London, 1887–9), vol. 1, xxix.
- 6 As for other critical views on the play, see W.W. Greg, 'Massinger's Autograph Corrections in *The Duke of Milan*, 1623', *The Library*, 4.3 (1923), 207–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/library/s4-IV.3.207>; Giuliano Pellegrini, *Barocco Inglese* (Messina, 1953); M.J. Thorsen, 'Massinger's Use of *Othello* in *The Duke of Milan*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 19.2 (1979), 313–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/450211>. Ira Clark, *The Moral Art of Philip Massinger* (Cranbury, 1993); Kibrina Davey, 'To Act or Not to Act?: Performing the Passions of Cuckoldry in Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* and *The Duke of Milan*', *Textus* 29.2 (2016), 143–62, <http://doi.org/10.7370/86646>.
- 7 Pellegrini, *Barocco Inglese*, 173–8.
- 8 See Philip Edwards and Colin A. Gibson, eds, 'Introduction to *The Duke of Milan*', in *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1976), 199–212, 202, <http://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199696888.book.1>.
- 9 See Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587–1642* (Princeton, 1940), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400877300>; Ronald Broude, 'Revenge and Revenge

- Tragedy in Renaissance England', *Renaissance Quarterly* 28.1 (1975), 38–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2860421>; Robert C. Jones, 'Italian Settings and the "World" of Elizabethan Tragedy', in *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 10.2 (1970), 251–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/449916>.
- 10 Massinger heavily relied on *Othello*, and his indebtedness in terms of parallels in plot, characters, and verbal echoes is clear. See Frost, *The School of Shakespeare*, 112–15, and Thorssen, 'Massinger's Use of *Othello*'.
 - 11 Marrapodi, 'Appropriating Italy', 3.
 - 12 See Edwards and Gibson, 'Introduction to *The Duke of Milan*', 203; Pellegrini, *Barocco Inglese*, 174–7.
 - 13 *The Duke of Milan*, 3.1.81–2. Philip Massinger, *The Duke of Milan*, ed. Philip Edwards and Colin A. Gibson, in *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, 5 vols (Oxford, 1976). All further in-text citations from Massinger's plays are from this edition.
 - 14 Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary: Containing His Ten Years Travel Through the Twelve Dominions of Germany, Bohemia, Switzerland, Netherland, Denmark, Poland, Italy, Turkey, France, England, Scotland and Ireland* (Glasgow, 1907), 364.
 - 15 William Thomas, *The Historie of Italie* (1549), ed. George B. Parks (Ithaca, 1963), 188.
 - 16 Numerous plays feature a duke of Milan, or a character named Sforza. See for example Robert Greene, *Alphonsus, King of Aragon* (1587), *The Duke of Milan and the Marquis of Mantua* (lost, 1579; see Wiggins, *Catalogue* #676, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199265725.book.1>); Galeazzo (lost, 1594; see Wiggins, *Catalogue* #958, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199265732.book.1>); *A Knack to Know an Honest Man* (1594), Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1594), Barnabe Barnes's *The Devil's Charter* (1606), and Fletcher's *Women Pleased* (1620).
 - 17 After Massinger's play, Robert Davenport's *The City Nightcap* (1624) features a duke of Milan and a Milanese gentleman named Francisco; Thomas Heywood's *A Maidenhead Well Lost* (1629), set in Milan and Florence, features the daughter and widow of a noble gentleman, General Sforza; Aston Cockayne's *Trappolin Supposed a Prince* (1633) has one scene set in Milan (2.2) and one of its characters is a duke of Milan named Sforza; Robert Gomersall's *Lodovick Sforza* (1628) is entirely set in Milan and its protagonists are Galeazzo, Duke of Milan, his wife Isabella, and Lodovick Sforza.
 - 18 Moryson, *Itinerary*, 364.
 - 19 The name also recurs in plays set in Italy with Italian characters, such as *The Tempest*, where Francisco is a lord serving under the King Alonso of Naples, Fletcher's *The Chances* (1617), Jonson's *The Case is Altered* (1597), and Middleton's *The Widow* (1615), set in a town in north-eastern Italy, probably in Istria, a peninsula in the

- northern Adriatic which was governed by Venice in the Renaissance. Giovanni is also a character in Marston's *The Malcontent* (1606) set in Genoa.
- 20 According to Gary Taylor, the original setting was Ferrara but it was moved to Vienna by Middleton when he revised the play. See 'Shakespeare's Mediterranean *Measure for Measure*' in *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*, ed. Tom Clayton, Susan Brock, and Vicente Forés (Newark, 2004), 243–69, 257.
 - 21 In Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, and William Haughton's *Patient Grissil* (1600) there are references to Pavia; the city is probably the setting of a lost play, presumably by Dekker, entitled *The Tale of Jocundo and Astolfo* (1598–1632). See Wiggins, *Catalogue* #2242, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198777717.book.1>.
 - 22 John Fletcher, *The Chances*, in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, ed. George Walton Williams, general ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, 1979).
 - 23 William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells, et al. (Oxford, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199267170.book.1>.
 - 24 Jones, 'Italian Settings', 259.
 - 25 See Thomas, *The Historie of Italie* (1549); Jane Black, *Absolutism in Renaissance Milan: Plenitude of Power Under the Visconti and Sforza* (Oxford, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199565290.001.0001>.
 - 26 George K. Hunter, 'English Folly and Italian Vice: The Moral Landscape of John Marston', in *Jacobean Theatre*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London, 1960), 85–111, 96.
 - 27 *An Epitome of Ortelius His Theater of the World* (London, printed by Iohn Norton, 1601; STC: 18856), *Early English Books Online (EEBO)*, 65 sig.K.
 - 28 As Roma Gill suggests, Massinger must have had access to one of the manuscript translations preceding Edward Dacres's English translation printed in 1640. See Roma Gill, "'Necessitie of State': Massinger's *Believe As You List*", in *English Studies* 46 (1965), 407–17, 408–9.
 - 29 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe. Saggi e Commenti*, ed. Giorgio Inglese (Rome, 2013), 144.
 - 30 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella (Oxford, 2005), 80–1.
 - 31 Michael J. Redmond, *Shakespeare, Politics, and Italy: Intertextuality on the Jacobean Stage* (Farnham, 2009), 122, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315608716>.
 - 32 Ira Clark, *Professional Playwrights. Massinger, Ford, Shirley, & Brome* (Lexington, 1992), 46.

- 33 As for examples of villains with Spanish-sounding names, see Mendoza in *The Malcontent*, Roderico D'Avolos in Ford's *Love's Sacrifice* (1632), and Romelio in Webster's *The Devil's Law-Case*.
- 34 Linda Woodbridge, *English Revenge Drama. Money, Resistance, Equality* (Cambridge, 2010), 82, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781469>.
- 35 Domenico Lovascio, *Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the Classics* (Manchester, 2022), 12, <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526157393>.
- 36 Both these works are among the main sources of Massinger's *The Roman Actor*. For a detailed analysis see Colin A. Gibson, 'Massinger's Use of His Sources for *The Roman Actor*', *Journal of Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 15 (1961), 60–72, <https://doi.org/10.1179/aulla.1961.15.1.006>.
- 37 Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, 53.
- 38 Alastair Bellany, 'Thinking with Poison', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Age of Shakespeare*, ed. Robert Malcolm Smuts (Oxford, 2016), 559–79, 563, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199660841.013.32>.
- 39 Moryson, *Itinerary*, 406.
- 40 Bellany, 'Thinking with Poison', 562.
- 41 Catherine E. Thomas, 'Toxic Encounters: Poisoning in Early Modern English Literature and Culture', *Literature Compass* 9.1 (2012), 48–55, 54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00861.x>. See also Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal* (Cambridge, 2002).
- 42 See Tanya Pollard, *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199270835.001.0001>; Lisa Hopkins and Sharon McDonnell, 'Romish Poison: *Claudius Tiberius Nero*', in *Textus* 29.2 (2016), 103–22, <https://doi.org/10.7370/86644>.
- 43 John Webster, *Three Plays: The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, The Devil's Law-Case*, ed. David Charles Gunby (London, 1972).
- 44 For an analysis of Jews in early modern Italy, see Flora Cassen, *Marking the Jews in Renaissance Italy: Politics, Religion, and the Power of Symbols* (Cambridge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316798492>. As for the treatment of Jews in English Renaissance Drama, see Peter Berek, "'Looking Jewish" on the Early Modern Stage', in *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England*, ed. Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson (Farnham, 2011), 55–71, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315604749>.
- 45 Cited in Jonathan Gil Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1998), 83.
- 46 Harris, *Foreign Bodies*, 85. For the depiction of Jewish doctors, see also Todd H.J. Pettigrew, *Shakespeare and the Practice of Physic: Medical Narratives on the Early*

- Modern English Stage* (Newark, 2007), 74–82; Saskia Zinsser-Krys, *The Early Modern Stage Jew* (Frankfurt, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.3726/b10763>.
- 47 Pollard, *Drugs and Theater*, 113. On poison see also Miranda Wilson, *Poison's Dark Works in Renaissance England* (Lewisburg, 2013).
- 48 Mariangela Tempera, 'The Rhetoric of Poison in John Webster's Italianate Plays', in *Shakespeare's Italy. Function of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama*, ed. Michele Marrapodi, A.J. Hoenselaars, Marcello Cappuzzo, and L. Falzon Santucci (Manchester, 1993), 229–50, 234.
- 49 Susan Zimmerman, *The Early Modern Corpse and Shakespeare's Theatre* (Edinburgh, 2005), 26, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748680764>.
- 50 Henry Chettle, *The Tragedy of Hoffman, or A Reuenge for a Father*, in *Five Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Emma Smith (Oxford, 2012). The image of Aetna in Massinger's tragedy may have influenced William Heminge's *The Fatal Contract* (1633), where the king feels he is burning due to poison: 'There is an Aetna in me' (1.3.87). In *The Plays and Poems of William Heminge*, ed. Carol A. Morley (Madison, NJ, 2006).
- 51 See Robert N. Watson, *The Rest is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1994), <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft7m3nb4n1/>.
- 52 Thomas Rist, *Revenge Tragedy and the Drama of Commemoration in Reforming England* (London, 2008), 14, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315244211>; Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford, 1999), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198183860.001.0001>.
- 53 Wendy Griswold, *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre, 1576–1980* (Chicago, 1986). For similar critical views, see also Broude, 'Revenge and Revenge Tragedy' and 'Time, Truth, and Right in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Studies in Philology* 68.2 (1971), 130–145, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4173715>.
- 54 Thorssen, 'Massinger's Use of *Othello*', 325.