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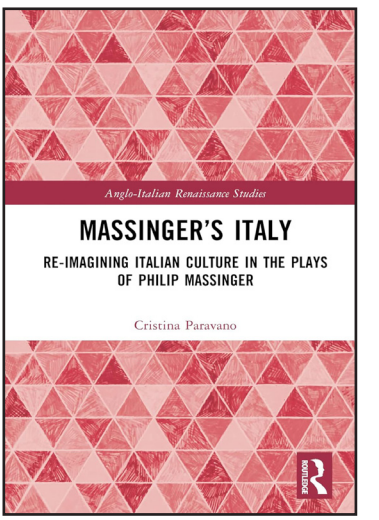

Philip Massinger never set foot in Italy and probably could not even read Italian. Yet about twenty-seven percent of the plays in which he had a hand were originally set in Renaissance Italy, a number rocketing to forty percent if one considers only his unaided dramatic works. This seeming paradox is the mainspring behind Cristina Paravano's *Massinger's Italy: Re-Imagining Italian Culture in the Plays of Philip Massinger*, the first monograph on Massinger published since 2010.

In a field dominated by the ubiquitous presence of William Shakespeare, Massinger remains a neglected figure — a state of affairs in stark contrast with Massinger's status as one of the most commercially successful playwrights of his time. Paravano follows in the steps of other recent publications and initiatives that attempt to bring Massinger closer to the scholarly spotlight, and she does so with an interesting, well-researched, and insightful book that 'offers a comprehensive investigation of Italy's pervasive influence and of its signifying force as a setting and as a source of ideas in the whole canon of Massinger's plays' (2).

The volume's introduction is followed by five chapters and a conclusion. From the smoothly structured introduction one learns that Massinger did not confine himself to choosing different Italian cities for his plays' settings but rather persistently engaged 'with stories, ideas, theories and characters from the Italian literary and cultural tradition' (2), though invariably through intermediary texts in English, French, or Spanish. Facing the thorny but inevitable issue of collaboration in Massinger's canon, Paravano convincingly argues that Massinger's interest in Italy appears to have been more sustained than John Fletcher's and hypothesizes that

'this was an interest they shared or a penchant that Massinger further developed in his solo plays after his long-standing partnership with his mentor' (5).

Massinger's engagement with Italian material, Paravano contends, is multifaceted, 'ranging from recognizable or allusive references to Italy, the encounter with Italian genre models, topoi, characters, places and ideas to the contamination of narremes and theatregrams' (5); these are all aspects that Paravano abundantly explores in the ensuing chapters. She identifies a progressive shift in Massinger's depiction of Italy from its more traditional portrayal as a den of sinners and murderers to a more benevolent representation 'as a place where even unworthy and morally questionable characters are given the chance to redeem themselves' (8) to finally settling on a bleaker, though less stereotypical, depiction in *The Bashful Lover*, one which eerily seems to predict the fragmentation of the English state resulting from the civil war.

Chapter one examines Massinger's experimentation with tropes and theatregrams derived from the Italian *commedia grave* (mainly in the presence of an exemplary female protagonist or *donna mirabile*) and commedia dell'arte (especially its *maschere*) across several of his tragicomedies (singlehandedly or in collaboration) in the 1620s and 1630s. Highlighting these innovations, Paravano forcefully argues for Massinger's contribution to the development of this genre.

The second chapter delves into Massinger's engagement with the Italian novelistic tradition in six (collaborative and solo) plays, *The Queen of Corinth*, *The Laws of Candy*, *The Knight of Malta*, *The Maid of Honour*, *The Little French Lawyer*, and *The Picture.* This chapter argues that Massinger 'ingeniously refashioned Italian novellas into tragicomedies which could reflect the concerns and anxieties of his age' (61), which would be particularly appealing to the female theatergoers in the audience of the Blackfriars.

The following chapter examines Massinger's handling of Italian elements in the subgenre of revenge tragedy in *The Duke of Milan* and *The Double Marriage*. The Italian setting of both plays is in keeping with the stereotypical Elizabethan and Jacobean depiction of Italian courts as extremely wealthy but simultaneously swarming with schemers, fornicators, and poisoners. *The Duke of Milan* emerges as particularly worthy of discussion for its allusions to the excessive power held by court favourites under James I and because the anxieties surrounding the soul's fate after death that plagued post-Reformation England likewise inform this play. Paravano then investigates the portrayal of tyranny and its consequences in *The Double Marriage* while exploring the strong metatheatrical dimension of the play. Private revenge takes on a political dimension that makes revenge universal

'because it hints at the implications of divine right and especially at the lawfulness of revenge against a king who is unfit for rule' (84).

Chapter four discusses Massinger's interest in Niccolò Machiavelli's writings as manifest in the portrayal of rulership in four solo plays: *The Maid of Honour*, *The Great Duke of Florence*, *The Guardian*, and *The Bashful Lover*. The first two provide examples of bad sovereigns, while the latter two focus on more positive modes of male and (especially) female governance. This chapter manages to shed new light on the degree to which these plays were embedded in the political realities of the Stuart period, especially the increasing concerns regarding the new monarch's absolutist tendencies and the meddling of court favourites in foreign policy in the early years of the Caroline era.

The fifth chapter concentrates on Massinger's vision of Venice across several of his plays, with a special focus on *The Renegado* and *Believe As You List*. Although Massinger did not set any of his plays in Venice, many make frequent references to that city, especially its multicultural and multireligious character. *The Renegado* grapples with the crucial role of Venice in commercial exchanges with Asia and its position as the last bulwark of Christianity against Muslim attacks; and it likewise reflects on the internal divisions within Christianity and the rise of arminianism in England. The first version of *Believe As You List*, which was censored by the master of the revels for its excessive, explicit allusions to contemporary politics, featured scenes set in Venice and Florence. When Massinger revised the play for resubmission to the censor, Venice became Carthage. But the Italian location was not erased completely, and it still appears to resonate vividly in its revised version.

The conclusion thoughtfully spells out the importance of this monograph and its larger implications. Despite 'Massinger's plays [being] devoid of precise geographical details and historically accurate settings' (139), the Italian locale proves to be not merely a convenient backdrop but a grounding element for the creation of meaning. Paravano underlines how Massinger transcended the stereotypical traits associated with Italy in the period — vindictiveness, jealousy, possessiveness, promiscuity, a special relationship with food, a talent for commerce — thus creating 'his own vision of Italy and its culture' (138); that is, Massinger envisioned 'a fragmented Renaissance country with solid Roman roots and an enormously rich cultural and literary heritage and, at the same time, a Catholic country with multiple political faces which proved to be a suitable fictional arena for debate and mediation' (141).

Massinger's Italy is a sound study offering compelling analyses of several of the plays in the Massinger canon that shed new light on his eclectic and creative use

of sources — Paravano even proposes new possible sources for some of the plays she examines (see 57–8). The author, moreover, persuasively contends that Massinger 'played an important part in the evolution of the European tragicomedy [by] providing a personal moral twist and enhancing the dialectic potential of the genre' (140) as well as by virtue of his conversation with Italian literary and cultural resources. Invariably attentive to the interconnections across the canon, Paravano is particularly commendable for her painstaking examination of Massinger's deftly imaginative use of onomastics, which is more than once productive of new critical insights both into the single plays and into Massinger's playwriting modus operandi at large.

The book is very well documented, but Paravano's rigorous research into previous scholarship turns out to be a double-edged sword. Some sections of the book come across as a little too reliant on earlier studies, and at times the extent of the author's original contribution is not immediately clear, as is particularly evident in chapter one. And while, as a Fletcher specialist myself, I sympathize with the author's perceived need to describe at length lesser known plays than those of Shakespeare, Marlowe, or Jonson, some readings occasionally become less exciting than they otherwise could have been because they are too congested with plot summaries.

These reservations aside, Cristina Paravano's *Massinger's Italy: Re-Imagining Italian Culture in the Plays of Philip Massinger* stands out as a significant scholarly achievement. This monograph gives one of the most successful playwrights of early modern England the critical attention he deserves, thereby contributing to questioning the hegemony of Shakespeare in Renaissance and early modern studies, in particular by providing readers a glimpse into a different way of dramatizing Italy on seventeenth-century stages than that of Shakespeare. The book will become required reading for anyone working on Massinger, and it will appeal equally to students of early modern drama, Anglo-Italian relationships, and textual collaboration.