

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Duke of Milan 1625

Philip Massinger 1583-1640

OVERVIEW

Massinger the person and creator

Philip Massinger was born a commoner, but was able to manage a serious education at Oxford, where his father, too, had received his Master's degree, and remained a vigorous presence throughout his life. The son took his own direction, upon graduation from Oxford. But what was that direction? From 1606-13 Massinger effectively disappears from sight, reappearing finally in the London theatrical milieu, collaborating with his friend and frequent collaborator, John Fletcher. (He worked his way into the inner circle of the theatrical world, rising to the position of chief playwright to the King's Men theatrical company. Throughout his professional career he remained immersed in the theatrical world--though few details are known of him. His death perplexes us as do the details of his life. He died in his home, on March 18 1640, alone and having enjoyed, apparently, quite good health to the end. He was buried in St. Saviour's churchyard, alongside his friend and frequent collaborator, John Fletcher. Both men were deeply embedded forces in the London theater.

The play before us here reflects the high drive and action crowded atmosphere of Jacobean theatrical culture. The truth of history is visible in the background, that is the rough outlines of the account of the sixteenth century struggle between France and the Holy Roman Empire, for control over the states of North Italy--where Milan, the axis of the present play, is the key player. "The truth of history is visible." This is the way I put it. The fact is that Massinger knew even minimally more than his audience about this truth--of which he changed or altered many details. It will surprise no creator in the arts, to know that in Massinger's case, as in many others, ignorance was a step on the way to genuine creativity.

PLOT

The plot of the present play involves the intense and durable love affair of Ludovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan, for his wife, the Duchess Marceiia. The launching pad for the highly fictionalized working over of history, which Massinger undertakes, includes the years when the long simmering antagonisms between France and Spain were at their most intense. and when the Milanese were able to occupy a potent middle ground between the great powers. The Ruler of Milan, in the north of Italy, is Ludovico Sforza, a potent autocratic being whose power is defined ny his absolute devotion to his wife. The Duke's mother, and his sister Ariana are not pleased with this absolute devotion to Marcelia, and therein lies much of the upcoming bitterness of the play.

At this point international politics enters the picture; an old friend intrudes on the Duke, with the news that the armies of the Emperor are marching on Milan, and that Sforza must prepare for defeat. The duke's last act, before heading into this fateful conflict, is to instruct his best friend and brother in law. Francisco, that if he, Sforza, does not return alive, Francisco should kill Marcelia. This amazing demand overwhelms Francisco, who begs for an explanation. He learns that the duke could not endure to have his wife marry another.

This fraught and tense situation, n culminates in impressive and dignified discussions between the Emperor's court, and that of Milan, with the result that Sforza is securely reinstated in his governorship of Milan, and returns home--but to find that Francisco has not only not killed Marcelia, bit that he is actively making advances to her. One has only to imagine the wildness of his reaction.

Francisco, meanwhile, has used his trump card, showing Marcellia the Duke's letter, in which he outlines the steps Francisco should take to kill her. Now it is Marcellia's turn to be horrified. She has had no premonition of what was in the duke's mind. First the desire to kill her, then the desire to keep her. After a series of complex love-hate relationships, Francisco tells the duke that Marsillia has propositioned him. Sforza stabs Marcellia to death, but then in her dying breath she tells her killer the truth about Francisco, who flees the court, confirming his guilt.

An even more macabre conclusion puts an end to all this. In it, Sforza and Francisco have been old love rivals in the past, Francisco waits until Marcellia is dead--while he pretends that she is alive, and leads Sforza to her corpse, which Francisco has painted to appear fully, cosmetically alive. The corpse however has been covered with poisonous perfumes, and when Sforza leans over to kiss its lips he dies.

CHARACTERS

Sforza, the Duke of Milan. man of power and passion, presiding over a small and fiercely independent city state, itself surrounded by major contesting powers.

Marcella, Duchess and wife to Sforza.

Francisco, the Duke's best friend, in love with the Duchess, and married to the Duke's sister, who hates the Duchess.

Eugenia, sister of Francisco.

Tibero and Stefano, lords at the court,

Isabella, mother of Sforza, hates the Duchess. Notoriously tall of stature, and feisty, she squares off against her mother in law and her short sister in law.

THEMES.

Jealousy Jealousy is a constant theme in Elizabethan drama. Prone anyway to this weakness, the Duke sets himself up for an excess of this emotion, when he undertakes his mission to the Holy Roman Emperor. He has to make the trip, for his own power is threatened with overthrow, if he can not win a surcease from the powerful Spaniards. The dilemma, for the Duke, is that in undertaking this mission he will leave the gorgeous Duchess to the ravages of would be lovers, back in Milan. The worst possible development transpires, of course, for Francisco, the Duke's best friend, betrays the Duke by falling in love with, and making out with the Duchess. Francisco thus takes revenge on the sexual possessiveness of his best friend. The fall out from Francisco's revenge, consequently, determines the rest of the tragedy, not to mention the stabbing of the Duke himself.

Duplicity is an inevitable traveling companion to jealousy, for both states of mind hide in the shadows and thrive on dark clammy emotions. From the outset of the play, Sforza, Francisco and the Duchess seem to be bound together by intense love and respect for one another. The beauty and fidelity of the Duchess are legendary, a Hollywood set of perfectons, Francisco is the classic male buddy, and Sforza is the image of confident success and power. Deftly, Massinger reveals to us--at the end of the first Act--that these appearances are all false. No one is truly what he or she seems. The duchess is only nominally attached to the Duke, whose trophy wife she is. The Duke adores his wife as a beauty, but seems to have little more in common with her. Francisco, as subsequent events will soon reveal, has a lethal sexual passion for the Duchess.

EVENTS

Events, in the vulgar sense, abound in this play. That is, in fact, the hallmark of Elizabethan drama, where elements of the early modern world--bustling, proto-industrial, competitive guarantee an audience full of

vociferous enthusiasts eager to make their preferences known. We will have noticed, in discussing a growing number of early modern English plays, a passion, of approaches to hatred through violence. A large cargo of passions, requited or not, full bodied intensity; these ingredients compose the torrent of life embedded in this drama. *The Duke of Milan* is a perfect example of these characteristics.

The play boldly situates itself at the center of these tastes of its time and audience. Take the historical element, which is prominently constructed as the framework of the drama. That element is in the air of the culture; the events backgrounding the play widely known to the educated, though hardly in detail or with precision. (We are, after all, in an age of information, more than two centuries into the printing press, an age of feuilletons, newsletters, and international travel--and even the man on the street will have his internalized map of current affairs inside him) Onto this map he will have projected any number of attitudes, values, and tastes, among which will be appetites for adventure, gain and loss, personal involvements, such as today's television watcher brings to his morning scan of the day's news. Today's at home couch watcher will.