

# “Remembrance of things past”: Classical and Renaissance echoes in Philip Massinger’s *The Roman Actor*\*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay discusses Philip Massinger’s *The Roman Actor* (1626) as an example of the profoundly composite nature of early modern dramatic texts. Massinger placed borrowings and echoes from several classical and early modern texts in a new context, arguably counting on audiences’ pleasure of recognition. Focusing on sources which have not received enough critical attention, this essay investigates the influence of classical authors like Tacitus and Statius, and the impact of other Massingerian plays to shed light on the way the playwright appropriated and refashioned some sources to suit his tragedy’s political agenda.

KEYWORDS: *The Roman Actor*; Massinger; audience; sources; refashioning.

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clásicos y renacentistas en *The Roman  
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RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza *The Roman Actor*, de Philip Massinger (1626), como un ejemplo del carácter profundamente intertextual de los textos dramáticos de la modernidad temprana. Massinger colocó préstamos y ecos de varios textos clásicos y modernos en un nuevo contexto, posiblemente contando con el placer de reconocimiento por parte del público. Centrándose en fuentes que no han recibido suficiente atención crítica, este artículo investiga la influencia de autores clásicos como Tácito y Estacio y el impacto de otras obras teatrales de Massinger para arrojar luz sobre la manera en

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RESUMO: Este ensaio discute *The Roman Actor* (1626), de Philip Massinger, como um exemplo da natureza profundamente compósita dos textos dramáticos da proto-modernidade. Massinger colocou num novo contexto elementos emprestados e ecos de vários textos clássicos e proto-modernos, contando possivelmente com o prazer do reconhecimento por parte dos seus públicos. Dando atenção a fontes que não receberam ainda suficiente atenção crítica, este ensaio investiga a influência de autores clássicos como Tácito e Estácio e o impacto de outras peças de Massinger para lançar luz sobre o

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PALABRAS CLAVE: *The Roman Actor*; Massinger; público; fuentes; remodelación.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *The Roman Actor*; Massinger; público; fontes; remodelação.

In Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* (1626), the actor Paris exalts the way in which theater produces powerful emotions and may even move spectators to fear:

[...] I have once observed  
In a tragedy of ours, in which a murder  
Was acted to life, a guilty hearer  
Forced by terror of a wounded conscience  
To make discovery of that which torture  
Could not wring from him. Nor can it appear  
Like an impossibility but that  
Your father, looking on a covetous man  
Presented on the stage as in a mirror,  
May see his own deformity and loathe it.

(RA 2.1.90–99)<sup>1</sup>

The player suggests that staging *The Cure of Avarice*, a play that stigmatizes avidity as a harmful vice, may convince the greedy Philargus to abandon his miserly ways. The spectators sitting at the Blackfriars playhouse in late 1626 when *The Roman Actor* was staged for the first time may have realized that the attempt to prick the conscience of a guilty man was indebted to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.<sup>2</sup> As Martin Butler remarks, “[w]e know from theatre records and from [John] Greene's and [Sir Humphrey] Mildmay's diaries that *Hamlet*, *Henry IV*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *Midsummer Night's Dream* and other Shakespearean plays were still current in the private theatre repertoire” (1984, 131).<sup>3</sup> This passage from *The Roman Actor* mirrors the scene when the prince puts on *The Murder of Gonzago*, designed to compel Claudius to admit his crime in public. Even though the play-within-the-play fails since Philargus does not repent, the parallel

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from White (2007).

<sup>2</sup> See T. A. Dunn (1957, 243–245).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the shifting nature of the term “private” in the early modern period, see Price (2015) and Dustagheer (2017).

helps to emphasize the powerful effect of theater on audiences, its capacity to move them and to generate emotions. This is one of the numerous references, direct and allusive, to early modern texts which pervade Massinger's tragedy. As Jonathan Goldberg observes, *The Roman Actor* "reads at times as if it were an anthology of best-loved moments of Jacobean drama" (1983, 203). At the same time this Roman tragedy draws on a rich body of classical texts that Massinger modified – ignoring their historical accuracy –, deftly blending them to suit his dramaturgic needs.

Massinger's works have often borne the stigma of unoriginality and have been undervalued or even neglected since "they seem derivative, decadent, or simply belated," as Jeremy Lopez maintains (2014, 185). In the past two decades, new research<sup>4</sup> has led to a rethinking of source studies and a reconsideration of the concepts of *imitatio* and intertextuality, thus moving beyond the idea that, as Catherine Belsey clearly stated, "the sources identified" remain "inert in the process of interpretation" (2015, 62): plays should be read in terms of intertheatricality, as an interconnected "system of playing" (West 2013, 157), borrowing William N. West's words, rather than a canon of individual texts. As Colin Burrow argues, it may be difficult to identify practices of *imitatio*:

since writers can either consciously or unconsciously signal the fact that they are imitating another author or text, *imitatio* can often be marked by allusions or verbal echoes, which might shade off into faint intertextual minglings, or generate texts which are tesserae of other texts. (2019, 3)

Far from being derivative or imitative, *The Roman Actor* exemplifies the profoundly composite nature of early modern dramatic texts, what Douglas Bruster calls "mosaic-like textuality," that is, the texts' overlap with other "texts, events and individuals." The sources, quotations, and intertextual borrowings can be seen "as the beginning of a thick description of the text's place in a complex cultural milieu" (Bruster 2000, 4).

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Marrapodi and Hoenselaars (1998), Marrapodi (2004), Maguire (2008), Guy-Bray (2013), West (2013), and Britton and Walter (2018). See also Marvin Carlson's concept of "ghosting" (2011), namely the way theatrical performances are haunted by memories of past productions, and how these memories may have an impact on audience reception.

Considering this tragedy as a mosaic of other texts, as Burrow puts it, this essay aims to shed light on Massinger's ability to create a new play by drawing on a multiplicity of different works, ranging from classical texts to contemporary plays, and bend them to his dramaturgic needs. Critical readings of the play have mainly focused on the tragedy's metatheatrical devices, its reception, and its depiction of the state of the art of the English theatre in the late 1620s. Understandably, much discussion has been also devoted to Massinger's use of classical sources to shape his political analysis and to the implications of portraying a tyrant such as Domitian by setting Caroline London against the backdrop of imperial Rome.<sup>5</sup>

Yet not enough critical attention has been devoted to the way in which Massinger appropriated and refashioned some sources to suit his tragedy's political agenda. I will discuss the influence of classical authors like Tacitus and Statius, and the impact of other Massingerian plays, especially his collaborative tragedy *The Double Marriage* (1622). The prominent role of Tacitus's works in Massinger's play needs further exploration. A conspicuous number of references and echoes have been identified in several critical studies, as well as the influence of works such as his *Historiae*, *Annales*, and *Agricola*.<sup>6</sup> What has not been fully investigated is how Tacitus affected Massinger's depiction of his characters and provided him with a recognizable language with which to articulate his political and moral ideas. Massinger seems to take advantage of the fact that, as Alexandra Gajda points out, "in England in particular Tacitus seems to have been interpreted in a way that was actively critical of contemporary monarchs" (2010, 266).

Massinger's play was staged in a sensitive moment at the outset of the reign of Charles I. In the previous year, James I had died in late March and there was a violent outbreak of the plague, which claimed numerous victims. Among them was John Fletcher, chief dramatist of the King's Men and a close friend and collaborator of Massinger's, who succeeded him as principal playwright of the company. In 1626 the first political and social tensions began to emerge in the form of opposition to the Forced Loan imposed by the new king, and to his

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Patterson (1984), Hartley (2001), Curran (2009), Rochester (2010), Greenberg (2011), Dunnum (2012), and Robertson (2021).

<sup>6</sup> See Briggs (1912), Gibson (1961), Edwards and Gibson (1976a), Butler (1985), White (2007), and Paravano (2019).

increasingly absolutistic tendencies.<sup>7</sup> In this context Massinger wrote a tragedy which revolves around one of the most authoritarian and bloodthirsty emperors in Roman history. As Martin White also notes, the habit of the period was to draw analogies between past and present, and “the play’s presentation of a tyrannical and absolutist ruler who considers himself above the law [...] provided any spectator who wished to see it with an image of his own or her own times” (2007, 18).

The presence of Statius’s *Silvae* in the background of Massinger’s tragedy is also worth discussing. This work of poetry offers a completely different perspective on Domitian if compared to the disparaging opinions of Roman writers like Suetonius and Tacitus. Butler argues that “plays such as *The Roman Actor* found an appreciative audience among circles where cultivation of the classics accompanied a practical involvement in politics” (1985, 144) so that the echoes and quotations from classical authors contributed to fueling the political debate. The classical legacy seems to energize Massinger’s political discourse, especially if we consider Tacitus and Statius as representatives of two opposing political stances: the champion of classical civil liberty and the supporter of royal prerogatives.

*The Roman Actor* is not an open accusation and should not be read as a *pièce a clef*, in which emperor Domitian and his wife stand in for the royal couple, but nonetheless it exposes parallels and differences between imperial Rome and late 1620s England and shows that the stage could become an arena for the discussion of political issues. Both the historian Kevin Sharpe (1992) and Butler (1984) are convinced that an accommodation between the king and Parliament was still possible in the late 1620s and 1630s. Therefore, according to Julie Sanders, this play can be seen as an attempt at “counselling the new monarch in ways not to govern, just as Ben Jonson had done his royal father before him” in *Sejanus* (1999, 20). Nevertheless, as Andrew Gurr suggests, the King’s Men must have been aware of the bold political message embedded in the play: There are no records of court performances of *The Roman Actor* and even the 1629 quarto of the tragedy does not confirm that it was performed at a royal venue: “[p]resumably the company, while painfully sympathetic to the image it presents of the victim role that a playing company could

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<sup>7</sup> See Cust (1987) and Sharpe (1992, 9–22).

suffer under a tyrant, thought it less than tactful to show its own patron such a story" (2004, 194).

On the other hand, intertextual references may have appealed not only to those who were well versed in classical culture but also to a wider group of regular theatre-goers who were familiar with several dramatic texts. Massinger introduced references, verbal parallels, and echoes from plays by Jonson (*Sejanus* and *Catiline's Conspiracy*), Shakespeare (*Richard III* and *As You Like It*), Thomas Dekker, and Thomas Middleton (*The Patient Man* and *The Honest Whore*), to cite just a few examples, into a new context, presumably counting on the audience's pleasure of recognition.<sup>8</sup> I will concentrate on *The Double Marriage* (1622), a tragedy co-written with Fletcher, and will evaluate its possible impact on and intertextual links with *The Roman Actor*. Even though Martin Wiggins lists the text among the sources of Massinger's Roman tragedy, its influence has been investigated only marginally and thus deserves more attention.<sup>9</sup>

The complexity and intricacy of the net of classical and contemporary references in *The Roman Actor* may give us a glimpse of the inclinations of Caroline audiences in indoor theatres. Even though there was no uniformity of taste and experiences, Massinger had the opportunity to play "with a theatrically literate audience that can be depended on to catch the references," as Rochester argues (2010, 4). Playwrights exploited familiarity to appeal to their clientele, "assuming an audience already conversant with the stage repertoire," as Butler asserts (1984, 107). Dramatists were aware of the expertise of many of the frequent play-goers that flocked to see their works, as proved by the prologue and epilogue in which they address them. In the prologue to *The Lady's Privilege* (1637-1640), Henry Glapthorne praises his audience as "wits most accomplish'd Senate."

The comparison of early modern spectators and the Senate is appropriate to introduce a discussion of *The Roman Actor*. This Roman play puts on stage a senate divested of its function in which Senators are mere spectators of Domitian's actions; at the same time, it offers a profound reflection on the function and the process of spectatorship

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<sup>8</sup> See White (2007), who identifies the influence of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Middleton's *Women, Beware Women*, Wiggins (*Catalogue* #2190), and Robertson (2021), who discusses the influence of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*.

<sup>9</sup> See Hoy (1985), White (2007), and Wiggins (*Catalogue* #2007).

and reception due to the presence of numerous metatheatrical devices, and the network of citations from other texts, which makes of Massinger's tragedy "more than just an intertheatrical anthology," as Lauren Robertson puts it (2021, 75).

As several studies have demonstrated, Massinger relied on an ample and varied body of classical writings, predominantly by anti-Domitianic authors. *The Roman Actor* can be ascribed to a group of plays from the Stuart period which are all set in imperial Rome, and which draw on the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus (Butler 1985, 139). The playwright is largely indebted to Suetonius, whose *De Vita Caesarum* relates the lives of the Caesars, but he also read Tacitus's *Agricola* and *Historiae*, Juvenal's *Satires*, Cassius Dio's *Historia Romana*, the anonymous *Epitome de Caesaribus*, Plutarch's *Lives*, Statius's *Silvae*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Horace's *Satires*.<sup>10</sup> The humanist interest in classical learning and Tacitian thought made classical texts more current to Massinger and his audience than we might expect. The English Renaissance saw a renewed interest in Tacitus as a stylistic model and as "chronicler of imperial tyranny and courtly corruption," in Paulina Kewes' words (2011, 516). The Roman historian was often used to amplify the distinction in Roman law between subjugation and freedom. In his *Annals* he describes how the Roman people were often forced into servitude in the early phases of the Principate. Those who interpreted the emergence of the royal prerogatives of Charles I in light of Tacitus's thought could easily see the crown's absolutistic tendencies, as Quentin Skinner claims, "as nothing less than an aspiration to reduce a free people to servitude" (2002, 319).

Massinger looks at the political context through the lens of Tacitus's arguments. In the play Senator Rusticus stigmatizes the problems of his age by claiming that "to deserve well | Held capital treason" (*RA* 1.3.74-75). The character is rephrasing the following sentence from Tacitus's *Agricola*, a work that radically attacks Domitian's image and profoundly affected Massinger's conception of

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<sup>10</sup> For an earlier analysis of the sources, see Gibson (1961), who provides an insightful investigation of the classical sources of the play, White (2007), and Wiggins (*Catalogue* #2007), who expand the critical horizon to include echoes references and quotes from contemporary plays. Building on their works, and as stated in the introductory paragraphs of this essay, I offer a more in-depth discussion of Tacitus's impact and Statius's influence, so far neglected, and examine a Massingerian play identified as a source but never fully investigated.

Caesar: “*tam saeva et infesta virtutibus tempora*” [so harsh was the spirit of the age, so cynical towards virtue] (*Agricola* 1.1).<sup>11</sup> The example of the Roman historian led Massinger to depict a “political problem as a problem of morality” (Butler 1985, 146). In delineating Caesar’s character, Massinger follows rigorous principles; he emphasizes Caesar’s brutality and cruelty, crafting the image of an “emperor who preached morality but practiced incest and murdered his opponents” (1992, 19), as Brian Jones notices. In the play, Domitian is not condemned for his inadequacy as a ruler but for his lack of integrity and ethical concerns regarding his political opponents and everyone else around him.

The dramatist’s depiction of female characters and the ample space he assigned to them also recalls Tacitus. The Roman writer was deeply concerned with the role of women and gave them “more space in his work than most ancient historians,” as Jenifer Swindle notes, even though their portrayal was often unfavorable (2003, 106). Massinger’s interest in female characters may also be due to the predominance of women in Blackfriars audiences compared to the Globe, the King’s Men outdoor theatrical venue.<sup>12</sup> *The Roman Actor* represents Massinger’s version of Emperor Domitian’s fall in which all the female characters are actively involved in revenge plots and in Caesar’s murder. Like Tacitus, Massinger “shows how elite women’s domestic roles could, and did, become a political force to be reckoned with” (Milnor 2012, 473). Even though they properly belong to the *Gens Flavia*, if we look at them in terms of attitudes, behavior, and number, Massinger’s women seem to be more similar to the shrewd women eager to rule, or *avidae dominandi* (see *Annals*, 6.25), from the Julio-Claudian dynasty.<sup>13</sup> The female characters in the play embody the idea of the constant female rivalry described by Tacitus as *aemulatione muliebri* (*Annals* 2.43). Their portrayal reveals how Massinger assimilated Tacitus’s approach and saw the court politics in Tacitean terms: driven by “a factious pursuit of personal advantage” and “shaped by jealousy, malice and fear,” as Malcolm Smuts points out (1994, 36).

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<sup>11</sup> All English translations from Latin are from the Digital Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>12</sup> For more on Caroline audiences, see Neill (1978) and Gurr and Karim-Cooper (2014).

<sup>13</sup> In *Annal* 6.25 Tacitus defines Agrippina as *dominandi avida*, yet the phrase can be applied to other women belonging to the Julio-Claudian dynasty.



In the following extract from the play, the main female characters – Caenis, Domitilla, Julia, and Domitia – are waiting for Caesar’s arrival after his triumph. Each of them wants to mark her own prominent position within the social and political hierarchy and, at the same time, attempts to appeal to the emperor’s benevolence:

*Enter JULIA, CAENIS, DOMITILLA, [and] DOMITIA.*

*Caenis.* Stand back. The place is mine.

*Julia.* Yours? Am I not  
Great Titus’ daughter, and Domitian’s niece?  
Dares any claim precedence?

*Caenis.* I was more:  
The mistress of your father, and in his right  
Claim duty from you.

*Julia.* I confess you were useful  
To please his appetite.

*Domitia.* To end the controversy –  
For I’ll have no contending – I’ll be bold  
To lead the way myself.

*Domitilla.* You, minion!

*Domitia.* Yes.  
And all ere long shall kneel to catch my favours.

*Julia.* Whence springs this flood of greatness?

*Domitilla.* You shall know  
Too soon, for your vexation, and perhaps  
Repent too late, and pine with envy when  
You see whom Caesar favours.

(RA 1.4.1–13)

The most erudite early modern spectators might have recognized this scene as dramatizing Tacitus’s description of the meeting between Agrippina and Livia after Augustus’s death. As Christina Shuttleworth Kraus observes, “When Germanicus enters the narrative proper, it is

also with women at his side, women who are themselves locked in a heated rivalry" (2009, 109), like those depicted on stage by Massinger as waiting for Domitian's arrival: "*accedebant muliebres offensiones novercalibus Liviae in Agrippinam stimulis, atque ipsa Agrippina paulo commotior*" [Feminine animosities increased the tension as Livia had a stepmother's irritable dislike of Agrippina, whose own temper was not without a hint of fire] (*Annals*, 1.33).

The unfavorable and critical portrayal of all these women seems to be informed by Tacitus, but the one who seems the most affected by a Tacitian reading is Domitia Longina. When she first comes on stage, she appears as a sort of Poppaea. For Ronald Syme, an authority on Tacitus, her first appearance in the *Annals* "happens to be light and graceful, putting the emphasis on her beauty, talent, and elegance of demeanour" (1981, 40). Both of them preach modesty but practice wantonness. Poppaea cunningly reminds the emperor that she is not available since she is married: "*mox acri iam principis amore ad superbiam vertens, si ultra unam alteramque noctem attineretur, nuptam esse se dictitans, nec posse matrimonium amittere*" [then – as the emperor's love grew fervent – changing to haughtiness, and, if she was detained for more than a second night, insisting that she was a wife and could not renounce her married status] (*Annals* 13.46).

In the play, Domitian, blinded by his passion for Domitia, compels her husband, Senator Lamia, to divorce her. When she finds out about the emperor's intentions, she pretends to be respectful of her marital bond, even though she feels tempted:

And were it in my power I would to be thankful.  
If that when I was mistress of myself,  
And in my way of youth, pure, and untainted,  
The Emperor had vouchsafed to seek my favours,  
I had with joy given up my virgin fort  
At the first summons to his soft embraces:  
But I am now another's, not mine own.  
You know I have a husband, for my honour  
I would not be his strumpet, and how law  
Can be dispensed with to become his wife,  
To me's a riddle.

(RA 1.2.33–43)

Domitia's initial refusal of the emperor and her faithfulness might have been interpreted as real rather than pretense, yet when she adds, "Suppose I should consent—how can I do it? | My husband is a senator of temper | Not to be jested with" (RA 1.2.48–51), she reveals a preexisting disregard for chastity. Her abrupt "metamorphosis from dutiful wife to imperial whore" like Poppaea, borrowing Vinson's words (1989, 440), suggests that Domitian is not attracted to a virtuous woman who resists his advances but to one who embodies the Tacitian notion of the manipulative woman. Like Agrippina the Elder and Livia, Augustus's scheming wife, Domitia is characterized by a female lack of moderation or "*muliebris inpotentia*," as Tacitus defines it (*Annals* 1.4 and 12.57), or the inability to control and restrain her passionate desires. Later in the play, when she forces the player Paris to obey her will, Domitia assumes an imperial tone worthy of the emperor, as if their close, almost symbiotic, relationship had turned her into his veritable alter ego: "Thou must! Thou shalt! | The violence of my passion knows no mean, | And in my punishments and my rewards | I'll use no moderation" (RA 4.2.79–82). The relationship between Domitia and Agrippina is twofold: according to Syme, "It would be no surprise if some features of this powerful woman [i.e., Domitia Longina] recurred in Tacitus's vivid portrayal of Agrippina's comportment and language" (1981, 50). This suggestion reinforces the connection between these two controversial and influential women.

Massinger's treatment of Domitia Longina is particularly elaborate. In addition to providing her with a marked Tacitean allure that makes her similar to Poppaea and Agrippina, the playwright seems to superimpose on Domitian's wife other characters as well in a bid to bring out multiple aspects of her personality and suggest hidden facets of it. The dramatist adds further layers of meaning, moving from a comparison to the Virgin Mary, in a scene which Hogan interprets as "a graceful and depraved version of the Annunciation" (1971, 275), to a portrayal of Domitia's uncontrolled appetite for power and sexual pleasures, which seems to combine Tamora's unrestrained libido in *Titus Andronicus* and Cleopatra's intense magnetism in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Massinger brings out different traits of this complex character's personality so that history, literature, religion, and mythology coexist in harmony. In 1.4, Caesar sees his wife as Juno:

But when I look on  
Divine Domitia, methinks we should meet

(The lesser gods applauding the encounter)  
As Jupiter, the Giants lying dead  
On the Phlegraean plain, embraced his Juno.

(RA 1.4.63–67)

The image may have been derived from Statius's *Silvae*, a collection of thirty-two occasional poems of praise that pay tribute to a number of influential people, especially Emperor Domitian.<sup>14</sup> In the *Silvae*, Statius also compares Domitia to Juno, albeit more explicitly: "*Iuppiter Ausonius pariter, Romanaque Iuno | Aspiciunt, et uterque probant*" [Ausonian Jove and Roman Juno alike regard with kindly brow, and both approve] (*Silvae* 3.4.18–19).<sup>15</sup> The stress on Caesar's Jovian divinity is common in Statius's poems. The poet addresses Domitian as "*nostris Iovis*" [our Jupiter] (*Silvae* 1.6.27), assigning him the attribute of a thunderbolt. The poet bases his imperial praise on the association of Caesar with the sun and stars and on the concept of light flowing from Caesar.

Unlike most of the other authors Massinger relied on, Statius was a contemporary of the emperor but was not among his open opponents like Tacitus or Suetonius. As Carole Newlands remarks, "along with the epigrams of Martial, Statius's *Silvae* are our only contemporary poetic witnesses to the age of Domitian" (2002, 2). Massinger may have found in Statius's *Silvae* a celebrative and complimentary portrayal absent in the reproachful accounts by the other Roman authors he used, who painted a critical picture of Domitian. Another example can be found in Act 4, when Domitian, upset by the accusations of his wife's infidelity with the player Paris, claims that she "borrows all her light from me" (RA 4.1.136). An analogous image recurs in an encomium to the emperor delivered by the god Janus: "*lucemque a consule ducit / omnis honos*" [every office draws luster from our Consul] (*Silvae* 4.1.26–27).

It is interesting to consider, as Newlands does (2011, 29), that the most famous exponent of the *Silvae* in early modern England was Ben Jonson, whose *Sejanus* is one of the main sources of Massinger's play.<sup>16</sup> In his Roman tragedy Jonson draws on Statius's *Silvae* to give voice to

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<sup>14</sup> For a more thorough exploration, see Paravano (2019).

<sup>15</sup> All quotations from Statius's *Silvae* are from Shackleton Bailey (2015).

<sup>16</sup> For the influence of Statius's *Silvae* on Jonson, see Newlands (1988).

his protagonist's hubris like Massinger does with Caesar. In 5.1 Sejanus overconfidently expounds on his power:

Swell, swell, my joys and faint not to declare  
 Yourselves as ample as your causes are.  
 I did not live till now, this is my first hour,  
 Wherein I see my thoughts reached by my power.  
 But this, and gripe my wishes. Great, and high,  
 The world knows only two, that's Rome, and I,  
 My roof receives me not: 'tis air I tread -  
 And, at each step, I feel my advanced head  
 Knock out a star in heav'n! Reared to his height,  
 All my desires seem modest, poor, and slight.

(Sej 5.1.1–10)

As has been remarked, the passage is reminiscent of Statius's poem to Domitian (4.2, "Thanksgiving To Emperor Augustus Germanicus Domitianus"), in which the Latin poet celebrates the emperor while describing a dinner with him as an experience akin to dining with Jupiter. In particular in line 3, Jonson recalls the following line from Statius's poem "*haec aevi mihi prima dies, hic limina vitae*" [This is the first day of my span, here is the threshold of my life] (*Silvae* 4.2.13), while later in lines 7–9 might be indebted to "*Tectum augustum, ingens, non centum insigne columnis, | sed quantae superos caelumque Atlante remisso | sustentare queant*" [An august edifice, vast, magnificent not with a hundred columns but as many as might support heaven and the High Ones were Atlas let go] (*Silvae* 4.2.18–20).

In Massinger's play there are two images which may have been inspired by the same poem by Statius, or rather by the playwright's reading of Jonson's tragedy. In 5.1 Domitian is aware of his fall and exclaims: "that's the latest hour | You e'er must see me living" (*RA*, 5.1.268–269).<sup>17</sup> While in 5.1 Sejanus sees the moment he is living as a new beginning, for Domitian this is the end of his reign. In the following extract, Massinger combines the same images found both in *Sejanus* and in Statius's poem when Caesar asserts his power: "Rome perish first, and Atlas' shoulders shrink | Heav'n's fabric fall, the moon, the stars | Losing their light and comfortable heat | Ere I confess that

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<sup>17</sup> White remarks that "this section is very reminiscent of the farewell of *Doctor Faustus* to the scholars in Act 5 of Marlowe's play, including the despair at 287, the counting of the clock, the bargaining with time" (2007, 195).

any fault of mine | May be disputed" (RA 2.1.155–159). Even though Atlas was an enormously popular and oft-cited mythological character, it is noteworthy that in Statius's *Silvae* he is mentioned only three times and always in poems dedicated to and dealing with Domitian (1.1, 4.2 and 4.3), as if there were an association between the powerful emperor and the titan who holds up the sky.

Besides Jonson's *Sejanus*, the tragedy *The Double Marriage*, which Massinger co-wrote with Fletcher, also had an impact on *The Roman Actor* offering verbal parallels and inspiration for the development of scenes and characters. The tragedy, set in fifteenth-century Naples, was performed by the King's Men at the Blackfriars playhouse around 1622. It revolves around the lustful and tyrannical king Ferrand, who may have inspired the character of Domitian. The first borrowing from the play, also identified by White, is from 5.2, when the noble Violet, a tenacious opponent of the king, says: "The castle's tower, | The only Aventine that now it left to him" (DM 5.2.28–29).<sup>18</sup> At the end of the play Violet mentions Aventine, one of Rome's seven hills and a symbol of power and safety, as the last defence left against his enemy, the usurping Aragonese King Ferrand. There is an allusion to the same hill in *The Roman Actor*,<sup>19</sup> when Paris exclaims: "My strong Aventine is | That great Domitian, whom we oft have cheered | In his most sullen moods, will once return" (RA 1.1.39–41). Massinger points to it at the beginning of the play when Domitian's power is at his zenith. This may cast a negative light on Caesar, doomed to suffer the same fate as the Neapolitan tyrant Ferrand. Moreover, it may suggest an analogy between Violet, who pronounces these words before being mistakenly murdered by his wife Juliana, and the player Paris, who is killed, though deliberately, by the emperor himself.

*The Double Marriage* inspired two scenes in particular. In Fletcher and Massinger's tragedy, the virtuous Juliana endures the rack but refuses to reveal where her husband Violet, who was involved in a conspiracy to murder the king, is hiding. The scene, which according to Cyrus Hoy was written by Massinger himself (1957, 147), bears remarkable similarities to the episode of Senator Sura and Rusticus's

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<sup>18</sup> Quotations from *The Double Marriage* are from Hoy (1994). The text has been modernized in spelling and punctuation.

<sup>19</sup> Aventine is mentioned only in *The Roman Actor* in the canon of Massinger's solo plays.

torture in *The Roman Actor*. The two plays associate power and public spectacle. At the beginning of the scene, Juliana is ready to die on that “glorious stage of murder,” as she tells Virolet’s father:

*Juliana.* Now by my Virolet’s life,  
 Father, this is a glorious stage of murder.  
 Here are fine properties too, and such spectators  
 As will expect good action, to the life;  
 Let us perform our parts, and we shall live,  
 When these are rotten. Would we might begin once;  
 Are you the Master of the company?  
 Troth you, are tedious now.

*Ferrand.* She does deride me.

(DM 1.2.102–109)

Like Ferrand, Domitian plays a central role in this performance of violence, and they are both identified as tyrants. As Sandra Clark observes, “perhaps through the influence of Massinger, the meaning of tyranny is amplified through references to theatricality which relate the self-displaying behaviour of Ferrand” (1994, 126). The two tyrants also have a large histrionic presence and a libidinous attitude (the Neapolitan ruler takes the daughter of his enemy Sesse as mistress and openly tells her father how much he enjoyed when he “crack’d her Virgin zone,” DM 5.3.126).

In both plays the victims of torture accept their fate and show the same determination. While Juliana defies Ferrand by proclaiming: “My life is thine, | But in the death, the Victory shall be mine” (DM 1.2.119–120), Senator Rusticus tells Caesar: “For beyond our bodies, | Thou hast no power” (RA 3.2.53–54). “Like Dorothea in [Massinger’s] *The Virgin Martyr*,” as Hoy argues, “she tires the executioners, and the patience with which she bears her sufferings reduces her tormentors to a state of impotent frustration, as the stoic endurance of the tortured senators does Caesar in *The Roman Actor*” (1985, 65). The two Senators undergo their torture impassively taking as a model the philosopher Clodius Paetus Thrasea, who committed suicide under emperor Nero.<sup>20</sup> Yet while Juliana’s

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<sup>20</sup> His death is described at length by Tacitus in his *Annals* (16.21–35).





de Bueil, seigneur de Racan's *Arténice*. As reported by the Florentine ambassador who witnessed her performance, the Queen

acted in a beautiful pastoral of her own composition, assisted by twelve of her ladies whom she had trained since Christmas. The pastoral succeeded admirably; not only in the decorations and changes of scenery, but also in the acting and recitation of the ladies – Her Majesty surpassing all the others. (Qtd. in Bentley 1946, vol.4, 548–549)

While Karen Britland sees *Arténice* as Queen Henrietta Maria's "cultural manifesto" (2006, 52), *Iphis and Anaxarete* can be seen as Domitia's. Although the influence that the Queen exerted over English social, political and cultural life became more and more noticeable in the 1630s after the Duke of Buckingham's death, we may presume that it started earlier.<sup>21</sup> In a play so full of contemporary resonances, Massinger's handling of metadrama seems a vehicle with which to comment on Stuart politics. "In the mirroring theater of conscience" of the play, as Jonathan Goldberg argues, "the king and the king's conscience were caught—whether offstage or on" (1983, 209). Therefore, if the play might have been a way to "offer advice and guidance" to Charles I, as Julie Sanders suggests, it was also possibly meant to give recommendations to his Queen (1999, 19).

Finally, *The Double Marriage* offers a seduction scene when Martia promises to release Virolet as long as he weds her. Virolet succumbs to the erotic temptation and when he exclaims "Alas, I have a wife" (*DM* 2.4.159), the way Domitia reminds Parthenius that she too is married easily comes to mind. This situation may have also inspired other seduction scenes, like the one between Paris and Domitia in *The Roman Actor* but also in other Massingerian plays which seem to relate to one another as though links in a chain. Lucy Munro correctly sees the similarity between Virolet and Vitelli in *The Renegado* (1624): Vitelli "is unable to resist the assertive Donusa" like "Virolet [...] is unable to offer any form of resistance to Martia" (2007, 128). These two seduction scenes may have influenced the one in *The Maid of Honour* (1622–1625),<sup>22</sup> a tragicomedy in which the Knight of Malta, Bertoldo,

<sup>21</sup> See Tomlinson (1992), Britland (2006), and Bailey (2009).

<sup>22</sup> For critical opinions on the dating of the play, see Edwards and Gibson (1976b), Beal (1980), Wiggins (*Catalogue*, # 2291), and Paravano (2021).

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who is betrothed to the virtuous Camiola, is seduced by the Duchess of Siena, Aurelia. The character bears some resemblances to Domitian's wife. When the Duchess sees Bertoldo, she is irresistibly drawn to him:

Let not, sir,  
The violence of my passion nourish in you  
An ill opinion; or, grant my carriage  
Out of the road and garb of private women,  
'Tis still done with decorum. As I am  
A princess, what I do is above censure,  
And to be imitated.

(MH 4.4.123–128)

Aurelia is conscious that her position will protect her from any form of criticism, despite the violence and abruptness of her passion for a man she barely knows. The episode is reminiscent of the scene in which Domitia expresses her wanton passion for the actor Paris using analogous words:

But for Augusta so to lose herself,  
That holds command o'er Caesar and the world,  
were poverty of spirit. Thou must! Thou shalt!  
The violence of my passion knows no mean.

(RA 4.2.77–80)

These four seduction scenes, all dealing with moral dilemmas, feature influential and lustful women who exert their own power over men who are socially or temporarily in a situation of inferiority. These male characters cannot resist the captivating appeal of their temptresses, who convince them to betray their moral values. In *The Roman Actor*, unlike the other men seduced, Paris has no way out. Every possible choice, accepting or refusing Domitia's immodest advances, will lead him to death.

*The Roman Actor* ends on a Shakespearian note. After questioning the legitimacy of Domitian's murder by claiming that "he was our prince, | However wicked" (RA 5.2.77–78), the First Tribune orders the others to "take up his body" (RA 5.2.88). The situation evokes *Hamlet*, when Fortinbras commands: "Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this | Becomes the field but here shows much amiss" (*Ham* 5.2.385–386). Like the Norwegian prince, the First Tribune restores order and the moral law, heralding a new dawn for Rome. In Massinger's play,

however, Caesar's body is not accorded any respect. His corpse stands for all the victims of Domitian's fury and abuses, murdered in his personal theater and buried without honors.

Massinger did not hide his indebtedness to classical or early modern sources, and he made his borrowings more explicit, creating a play that is "particularly haunted by its predecessors," in Marvin Carlson's words (2011, 8). For Goldberg, Massinger's play is an exaltation of theatricality, since "the power of plays is affirmed throughout *The Roman Actor*" (1983, 207): not only the power of the numerous forms of play-within-the-play but also echoes from early modern works reverberate in Massinger's tragedy, from Jonson's *Sejanus* to Shakespeare's works. The tragedy is an anthology of sorts of best-loved moments of English drama, not only of the Jacobean period as Goldberg argues, but of the English Renaissance, thanks to its polyphonic representation of the early modern stage repertoire, and of the classical cultural legacy, all of which resound harmoniously. *The Roman Actor* revolves around the concept of performance and its reception and relies on the response of early modern audiences, able to construct and appreciate the meaning of the play thanks to what Carlson defines as "collective and individual memories of previous experience" (2011, 165). Indoor theaters like the Blackfriars drew a wealthier, more socially homogeneous, and culturally elevated audience than the Globe;<sup>23</sup> their spectators were probably more in tune with political affairs and may have realized that Massinger was using the stage as a space for political and moral debate. Massinger's strength lies in his ability to enrich the texture of his play with "remembrance of things past" (*RA* 1.3.139), as the player Paris puts it, while creating a new view on the present and the future.

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<sup>23</sup> See Zucker and Farmer (2006), and Huebert and McNeill (2019).

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