

Marston's Venice as a New Rome in
Antonio and Mellida and *Antonio's Revenge*

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Abstract

Venice was a popular location for Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; not only did Shakespeare set two of his plays in Venice, but his contemporaries also showed considerable interest in Venice around the turn of the seventeenth century. Although John Marston's duology *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio's Revenge* occupy a significant place in the history of dramatic representations of Venice, they have not received due scholarly attention. The present paper is an attempt to consider the two *Antonio* plays in the context of the "myth of Venice," especially in terms of Venice's connection to ancient Rome.

An important element of the myth of Venice, first invented by the Venetians themselves and later propagated by writers and travellers throughout Europe, was the idea that the Venetian republic was an heir to the virtues of ancient Rome. Marston's *Antonio* duology not only makes use of this popular myth but also offers a critical commentary of the idea of Venice as a new Rome by juxtaposing the character of Piero Sforza, a Senecan tyrant, with the republican ideals of Venice. As it was well known in late Elizabethan England that the Duke of Venice was not given a great authority despite his status, Marston's tyrannical Duke is in direct contradiction to the accepted notion of the head of the Venetian government. By placing the archetype of tyranny in Venice, Marston's plays highlight the dangers Venice and Venetians inherently possess in their legacy from ancient Rome.

A contemporary poem by Edmund Spenser compares Venice to Babel and Rome, both mythical states known for their pride and eventual destruction. In a similar vein, the excessive pride and ambition of Piero in *Antonio and Mellida* are likened to what "Rome itself has tried" and he is warned that his "babel pride" will be punished (1.1.58-59). Indeed, Piero later suffers from speech impediment evocative of God's punishment on Babel. However, it is not only the villain who experiences the confusion of languages; when Antonio and Mellida are reunited after a painful separation, they start speaking in Italian verse, causing another character to comment from the sideline that "confusion of Babel has fallen upon these lovers" (4.1.217). Thus the comparison of Venice to Babel via Rome is deeply intertwined with the plot and involves not only the main characters but also the audience.

In the second play *Antonio's Revenge*, the plot quickly changes to that of a revenge tragedy. Here, the consequences of having a tyrant in Venice is thoroughly explored, the scene of Mellida's trial being the prime example; although a trial scene in which the Duke and the senators make an impartial judgment was a staple for a Venetian play, Marston's play upsets the myth of "Venice the Just" by having the tyrannical Duke rule the Venetian court. After Antonio achieves his bloody revenge, he refuses to be rewarded for his action and retires to a monastery. The play ends without any indication of Venice's future, questioning the validity of the myth of Venice as an ideal political entity.

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Among the Italian city-states chosen as locations for Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, Venice is clearly one of the more popular destinations; not only did Shakespeare set two of his plays – *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* – in Venice, but his contemporaries also showed considerable interest in Venice. A search on Literature Online reveals interest in Venice as a location clustered around the turn of the seventeenth century (see Fig. 1). The timing coincides with the publication of Lewis Leweknor’s translation of Gasparo Contarini’s treatise on Venetian government, which was probably circulated in manuscript form prior to publication and gathered many prefatory materials from notable writers of the day, illustrating that there was an interest in Venice in late Elizabethan literary circles as well as in the world of theatre.

Fig. 1: Chronology of plays with Venice as the central location

Author and Title	Performed	Published
Anonymous, <i>A Knack to Know an Honest Man</i>	1594	1596
Shakespeare, <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	1596-97	1600
Marston, <i>Antonio and Mellida</i>	1599	1602
Marston, <i>Antonio’s Revenge</i>	1600-01	1602
Shakespeare, <i>Othello</i>	1601-04	1622
Jonson, <i>Volpone</i>	1606	1606
Marston et al., <i>The Insatiate Countess</i>	1609-13	1613
Shirley, <i>The Gentleman of Venice</i>	1639	1655
Otway, <i>Venice Preserved</i>	1682	1682

Chronologically, Marston’s two *Antonio* plays (*Antonio and Mellida*, 1599; *Antonio’s Revenge*, 1600-1601) neatly fit between Shakespeare’s two Venetian plays (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1596-97; *Othello*, 1601-04). Considered together as a genre, these Venetian plays share certain

features that characterize them, which are based on what is commonly called the “myth of Venice” circulating in Renaissance Europe. According to this myth, the cardinal virtues of “La Serenissima Repubblica” [the Most Serene Republic] consisted of qualities such as “beauty, religiosity, liberty, peacefulness, and republicanism” (Muir 21). David McPherson, in his monograph *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice*, lists four representative images of Venice: “Venice the Rich,” “Venice the Wise,” “Venice the Just,” and “Venetia-città-galante” (27-28). An important part of the myth of Venice is the notion that Venice is an reincarnated, and even improved, version of the virtues of the classical world, especially ancient Rome, which results in explicit and implicit references to Rome and the Romans in the dramatic works set in Venice. Hence, Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* is praised as “the one in whom / The ancient Roman honour more appears / Than any that draws breath in Italy” (3.2.294) and Portia is compared to “Cato’s daughter, Brutus’ Portia” (1.1.166) because these characters in a Venetian play are to be understood as people inheriting the honourable traditions of ancient Rome.

John Marston’s *Antonio* plays, along with the plays by Shakespeare and Jonson, make up an important part of the stage representation of Venice at the turn of the century; however, the importance of Venice as the setting of these plays has not been fully recognized. Although G. K. Hunter, in his seminal essay “English Folly and Italian Vice,” goes so far as to state that “the most obvious aspect of Marston’s innovation in tragedy is his discovery of a suitable background for his vision of reality” (110), he goes on to discuss the Italian setting for tragedies in general and does not pay attention to the specific mention of Venice as background in Marston’s plays. On the other hand, previous studies of

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the relationship between the myth of Venice and early modern English drama have tended to most heavily focus on Shakespeare and, sometimes, Jonson, as suggested by the titles of such important monographs as *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice* by McPherson and *Shakespeare and Venice* by Graham Holderness, as well as of a collection of essays *Visions of Venice in Shakespeare*. The significance of “Venetian” plays as a genre has not been much discussed as a whole, and Marston’s plays in particular have not received much attention with regard to their relationship with the myth of Venice.

The present paper, then, is an attempt to read *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio’s Revenge* in the context of the myth of Venice, especially in terms of their connection to ancient Rome. W. Reavley Gair, the editor for the Revels edition of the duology, characterizes the *Antonio* plays as “historical fiction,” an “original and creative invention in which the persons are literary images evolved from the merging of actual historical people and events” (18). It is the intention of the present paper to illustrate how Marston creates an interestingly complex view of the city based on, and critiquing, the myth of Venice, especially the idea of Venice as an heir to ancient Rome.

1. Myth(s) of Venice and the Idea of Venice as a “New Rome”

Historian David Rosand defines the myth(s) of Venice as the “collective image” of “the self-proclaimed Most Serene Republic as an ideal political entity whose ruling patriciate were selflessly devoted to the commonweal” (2). Connection with ancient civilizations, especially with Rome, has always been central to the myth of Venice. Edward Muir cites what could be the oldest mention of this element of the myth; in a letter from Pope Gregory VII to the doge of Venice dated 1077, the pope

states that “the liberty of the Venetians came from their roots in the Roman nobility” (68). This instance shows that the idea of Venice as an heir to Rome was a part of the myth of Venice almost from its beginning. Muir notes the shift of emphasis in the myth in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when Venice, “[t]urning away from its Byzantine orientation..., looked toward Italy and the West for artistic inspiration and began to portray itself as a ‘New Rome,’ the true heir of both the ancient Roman Republic and Empire” (24). He goes on to argue that this myth of Venice as a new Rome was in its completed form in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, when “the analytic rhetoric of the humanists clothed Venetian institutions in neoclassical dress and made them appear as if they were living models of ancient ideals” (24). The connection with Rome was especially emphasized in the sixteenth century, when, after the loss of its eastern territories, the myth of Venice was in need of serious redefinition with a new emphasis on its connection to the West:

Two responses [to the change in the political climate] were deployed in tandem: a conceptual appropriation of the Byzantine East, just as it was slipping away, and a strengthened identification with the West, along with claims of Roman prerogatives and legitimacy. By the early years of the cinquecento, new initiatives in self-presentation were played out in a reaching back to the imagery of the classical world to expand the temporal and spatial parameters of the republic, in assertions of continuity in both human and political terms, and in restatements of the age-old principle of strength through diversity. (Brown 263)

It seems that it is this revised version of the myth, with renewed

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emphasis on Venice's connection with ancient Rome, that mainly made its way to Renaissance England.

It is difficult to point out exactly when the idea of Venice as a new Rome became an established notion in the English literary imagination. In William Thomas's *The Historie of Italie* (1549, reprinted 1561), one of the earliest substantial works on Venice and "a book which no subsequent writer who desired to represent Italy could have afforded to ignore" (Hadfield, *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing* 25), the Venetians are already mentioned as a more likely heir to the Roman tradition, the contemporary inhabitants of the Catholic Rome being thoroughly corrupted: the Romans, although they "haue in theyr heartes vnto this daie a certaine memorie of theyr auncient libertie, whiche they haue attempted many times to recouer," they are kept in tyrannous "subiection" to "the bishop [i.e. the Pope in Rome]" (Thomas 37-38, sig. K^{r-v}). However, the idea is promptly dismissed because of what Thomas sees as the lack of "chiualrie" in the Venetians: "...if the Venetians had ben men, as the Romains were, geuen as well vnto chiualrie by lande, as vnto the exercise on the water: no doubt thei might many yeres agoen haue subdued the worlde" (75, sig. V3^r).

In 1599, when Lewis Lewkenor's translation of Gasparo Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Gouernment of Venice* was published, the volume was adorned by commendatory poems by distinguished writers of the day, offering what many critics consider a showcase of various images and opinions on Venice. Many of these poems see Venice as a reincarnation of ancient Rome. John Harington's Venice is "For freedome *Emulus* to ancient *Rome*, / Famous for councill much, & much for armes" (sig. A4^r). For "I. Ashley," identified as Sir John Astley (Astington 106-11), who later became the Master of the Revels for James

I, Venice is a “[f]ayer mayden town,” a “sole wonder to all *Europes* eares,
/ Most louely Nimph, that euer *Neptune* got,” whose “glorious beauty calcs
vnumbered / Of rarest spirits from each foreign nation, swarmes” and
whose “virgins state ambition could not blot” for thirteen hundred years
(sig. *3^v). A slightly different, and more ambiguous, view of the city-state
is offered in a poem dedicated by “Edw. Spencer” [Edmund Spenser]:

The antique *Babel*, Empresse of the East,
Vpreard her buildinges to the threatened skie.
And Second *Babel* tyrant of the West,
Her ayry Towers vpraised much more high.
But with the weight of their own surquedry,
They both are fallen, that all the earth did feare.
And buried now in their own ashes ly,
Yet shewing by their heapes how great they were.
But in their place doth now a third appeare,
Fayre *Venice*, flower of the last world's delight,
And next to them in beauty draweth neare,
But farre exceeds in policie of right.
Yet not so fayre her buildinges to behold
As *Lewkenors* stile that hath her beautie told. (sig. *3^v)

Here, Venice is seen not only as a successor to the virtue of ancient Rome but also as a third Babel, for it is the great empire of the present age, equal in majesty with both Babel and Rome. Although Venice's superiority to both Babel and Rome is emphasized in the third quatrain, the comparison itself is not entirely eulogistic; both Babel and Rome in the poem are depicted as symbols of human arrogance, which inevitably led to their downfall². The variety of images and opinions represented in the prefatory materials to Lewkenor's book testifies to the fact that

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the image of Venice in the early modern English literary imagination is by no means straightforward or monolithic; although many seem to agree to the basic premise that Venice is an heir to the traditions of ancient Rome, opinions are divided as to which part(s) of the said traditions it inherited. This is partly because *Romanitas* (Romanness) for sixteenth-century English writers simultaneously meant a variety of qualities; as Clifford Ronan argues, “England found in Rome a glass where the island could behold its own image simultaneously civilized and barbarous, powerful and hollow” (7). As a consequence, Venice as a new Rome is also associated with diverse qualities, both positive ones such as liberty, freedom, honour, and equality under the law and negative ones such as “surquedry” (glossed by the Oxford English Dictionary as “arrogance, haughty pride, presumption”), opulence, excess, licentiousness, and moral corruption. Writers seem to select different elements of the myth of Venice to support their particular view of the city-state. Nevertheless, the shared notion of Venice being comparable to ancient Rome opened up spaces for writers to consider Venice in its relation to Rome, enabling them to discuss and evaluate Venice using the framework of the Roman model, with which they were familiar through their education in classical texts.

It is too simplistic to argue that these contemporary accounts of Venice as a new Rome “influenced” the dramatic representations of the city in any straightforward way. As Manfred Pfister argues, “the paradigms of influence and reception suggest too one-directional a model and do not sufficiently take into account the *constructedness* of the stereotypes” (299); surely a new historicist approach would be more useful, as Pfister suggests later (301). Moreover, the specific qualities of theatre as a medium must not be overlooked. Coppélia Kahn has drawn

attention to this in her study of *Romanitas* in Shakespeare, arguing that “[t]he public theatre, both as an art form and as a social milieu, allowed Shakespeare wide latitude in refashioning Romanness” (9); since the stage Romans were “[n]o longer models of ideal virtue but rather characters played by actors, they became visibly, materially, vulnerably present as objects of judgment and vehicles for current concerns” (13). A similar distinction could be made between the literary and the stage Venetians; the latter resemble the stage Romans in the sense that they are not simply examples of the qualities that their city embodies; rather, they are set against the backdrop of their city, whose qualities and reputations are consciously juxtaposed to the ways in which they as characters are represented. In the subsequent discussion of Marston’s plays, I hope to present a case study of how the audience are invited to consider the actions and characters on stage against the idea of Venice as a new Rome, especially the elements of tyranny and its consequences.

2. Piero Sforza, Tyrant of Venice

Antonio and Mellida begins with an Induction, in which the boy actors cast in the play appear as themselves “with parts in their hands, having cloaks cast over their apparel” (Induction 0.2-3), discussing how they should portray the characters assigned to them. The boy performing the role of Piero, Duke of Venice, receives the following advice from one of his peers:

O, ho! Then thus frame your exterior shape
 To haughty form of elate majesty,
 As if you held the palsy-shaking head
 Of reeling Chance under your fortune’s belt,
 In strictest vassalage. Grow big in thought

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As swoll'n with glory of successful arms. (Induction 7-12)

It is clear from this comment that the role of Piero is meant to be played as that of a typical tyrant, a stock character popular at the time. Even the character's family name, Sforza, which John Florio glosses as "to force, to enforce, to constraine, to compell, to ravish" in his Italian-English dictionary *A Worlde of Wordes* (368), suggests connections with the idea of forceful tyranny. The historical Sforzas, who ruled Milan in the fifteenth and the sixteenth century, acquired their family name because the effective founder of the dynasty, Muzio, was a "strong and hardie" mercenary soldier who "would by force take the bootie from his owne companions," according to William Thomas's account of the history of Milan (196). Thus, as Gair points out in his introduction to *Antonio and Mellida*, the name of the Venetian Duke in the duology is evocative of both "the general notion of tyranny connected with the name 'Sforza', and also the events in Italy that characterised the historical Sforza dynasty, in their rule of the Duchy of Milan between 1450 and 1535" (18), when four Sforzas – Francesco, Galeazzo Maria, Gian Galeazzo, and Lodovico – ruled Milan to varying degrees of success. Francesco Sforza (1401-66) was born an illegitimate son of Muzio Sforza, a Milanese *condottiero* (leader of mercenary soldiers), but his military prowess and an advantageous marriage to the Duke's daughter eventually awarded him the title of the Duke of Milan. His son and successor, Galeazzo Maria (1444-76), was a cruel and tyrannical ruler assassinated by his courtiers after a short reign. He was then succeeded by his seven-year-old son, Gian Galeazzo (1469-94), but his minority was taken advantage of by his uncle, Lodovico "il Moro (the Moor)" Sforza (1452-1508), who acted as regent to the young Duke. When Gian Galeazzo died under a suspicious circumstance, Lodovico ascended to

the throne of Milan, where he proved to be a powerful ruler as well as a patron of such Renaissance artists as Leonardo da Vinci and Donato Bramante (Gair, Introduction to *Antonio and Mellida*, 16-18). The qualities associated with the Sforzas such as military and political prowess, ambition, political marriages, opulence, tyranny, and licentiousness seem to have inspired the creation of Piero Sforza, the scheming archvillain of the *Antonio* duology.

On the other hand, the image of a tyrant ruling Venice is quite contrary to the image of the Doge advocated by the contemporary treatises on Venice. It is repeatedly emphasized by various English commentators of the period, both admiring and skeptical of the Venetian political system, that the Doge (Duke) of Venice does not possess any real authority to speak of; his power is limited, always held in check by other bodies of the government. Thomas notes that some Venetians refer to the Doge as “an honourable slaue,” for “though in appearance he seemeth of great astate, yet in his veraie deede his power is but small” (77). Contarini, in praise of the mixed government of Venice, emphasizes that the Doge “is depriued of all meanes, whereby he might abuse his authoritie, or become a tyrant,” so that although “in euery thing you many see the shewe of a king,” he has “authoritie in nothing, which without doubt whosoeuer is wise cannot but confesse to haue bene ordained by the Venetian commonwealth with exceeding prudence and wisdom” (42-43). James VI of Scotland (later James I of England) writes of Venetian dukes with contempt in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598, published anonymously); for James, “such sort of gouernors, as the dukes of *Venice* are, whose aristocratick and limited gouernment is nothing like to free Monarchies” (76) are not proper rulers, and therefore not worthy of consideration in his treatise on

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kingship. Marston's fictional Piero Sforza, then, is in direct contradiction to the accepted notion of the head of the Venetian government; the very idea of having a tyrant in Venice is the antithesis of the myth of Venice.

It is unlikely that Marston made a naïve error in choosing the setting for his plays; he was clearly well versed in Italian sources, as can be seen in his extensive use of the Italian language in the play. His mother was Mary Guarsi, the granddaughter of an Italian surgeon who had served Katharine of Aragon and Henry VIII (Gair, Introduction to *Antonio and Mellida*, 11). In addition to English texts on Italy such as Thomas and Lewkenor, as Gair suggests, he could also have come in contact with Italian sources on Milanese history such as Giovio's *Vita di Sforza* (Venice, 1558) and *Commentarii delle cose fatte per la restituzione di Francesco Sforza II* (Milan, 1539) (Introduction to *Antonio and Mellida*, 18). It is more likely, then, that his choice of Venice as a setting for the plays about tyranny is a deliberate one. By placing the archetype of tyranny in Venice, Marston's play functions as a critical commentary on the myth of Venice, highlighting the dangers Venice and Venetians inherently possess in their legacy from ancient Rome: the consequences of overreaching ambition and pride. As Clifford Ronan argues, "lofty aspiration was the chief Roman urge, a characteristic near allied to pride, which under the Latin term *superbia* suggests height, aboveness, and overness" (109). The desire to be above all others is often depicted on the early modern English stage as a cardinal Roman vice. The excessive pride of the stage Romans would often be represented as violent tyranny, so that the "spectator is focused on the perilous proximity of barbarity to all that is civilized in Rome" (Ronan 121).

Such dangers inherent in the myth of Venice-as-Rome seem to have been recognized by the writers on Venice. For example, one of Contarini's

main points in comparing Venice with ancient Rome is to dissociate Venice from these negative images of pride, ambition and tyranny. Rather than praising Venice for being “emulous” to ancient Rome, Contarini’s description of Venetian government emphasizes the difference between the Venetian and the Roman systems: though its government is modeled on the Roman political system, Venice is not simply a reincarnation of Rome but an improved version of it. The point that Contarini repeatedly makes is that the Venetians are more peace-loving and less ambitious than the Romans; whereas Rome “burst out into civill warres through which at length the same being the most flourishing & mighty commonwealth that euer was, fel downe to the ground, and that Citie abounding in such opulency, as being in manner Queene of the worlde, became a pray to the barbarous,” the ancestors of the Venetians “ordayned the whole life and exercise of their citizens to the vse and office of vertue, and alwaies with greater regard and reckoning applyed their minds to the maintenance of peace then to glorie of warres” (14-15, sig. C3^v-C4^r). The Venetians are also more cautious in determining the affairs of the state, for they use secret ballots instead of depending on the art of rhetoric and persuasion as the Romans did. Contarini repeatedly argues that Venetians are significantly superior to their predecessors in republican government because they were less ambitious and bellicose than the Romans. Whereas the ambition of such men as Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar led the state to civil war and degeneration of the republic into the empire, Contarini argues, Venice is well protected against the traps of tyrannical rule. Marston’s Venice, then, is depicted as a commonwealth on the verge of disintegration. As the “high and ambitious thoughtes” (Contarini 131, sig. S2^r) of army leaders such as Julius Caesar eventually destroyed the

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Roman Republic, Venice in *Antonio and Mellida* is a republic about to degenerate into an empire under the tyrannical rule of Piero Sforza.

Throughout *Antonio and Mellida*, Piero's excessive pride and ambition are depicted in connection to both Rome and Babel. At the beginning of the play, Piero is seen gloating over the success of his military attack towards Genoa, ruled by Antonio's father Andrugio:

Victorious fortune with triumphant hand
Hurleth my flory 'bout this ball of earth,
Whilst the Venetian Duke is heaved up
On wings of fair success to overlook
The low-cast ruins of his enemies,
To see myself adored and Genoa quake.

My fate is firmer than mischance can shake. (1.1.35-41)

Felice, one of the young Venetian courtiers, warns his Duke of the danger of overreaching ambition: "Beware, Piero, Rome itself hath tried; / Confusion's train blows up this babel pride" (1.1.58-59). In this one sentence, Rome and Babel are clearly connected as dark precedents for what Venice might become.

Felice's warning against Piero's pride connects Venice not only with Rome but also with another mythical state, Babel, the comparison strongly recalling Edmund Spenser's dedicatory poem for Lewkenor's translation of Contarini. Although there is no concrete evidence to suggest that Marston read Contarini either in Italian or in Lewkenor's translation, it is not improbable that he came across the book, and the prefatory material for it, before or while writing the *Antonio* plays. The book was enormously influential and was possibly circulating in manuscript years earlier than its publication in 1599; Astington suggests that the commendatory poems for Lewkenor's book were

composed and compiled sometime around 1595-96 (108). As Erskine-Hill, commenting on the Spenser poem, argues, “the parallel [to Rome and Babel] is appropriate ... because Venice, like Babel and Rome, could be seen as an international empire that drew in ‘strangers,’ and as Contarini argued, a market to the whole world” (121). Marston’s plays combine the description of Venice as an international metropolis with the illustration of pride which brought about God’s punishment on Babel.

3. Venice-Rome-Babel Triangle in *Antonio and Mellida*:

Confusion of Languages

Multilingualism was a feature of Venice which many early modern English travelers commented on. Many Renaissance travelers to Venice note the diversity of the population with reference to the languages spoken in the city. For example, Thomas Coryate observes that in St Mark’s Square one can “heare all the languages of Christendome, besides those that are spoken by the barbarous Ethnickes” (171; sig. O7^r).

In keeping with the city’s image as a multilingual metropolis, Venice in *Antonio and Mellida* abounds with phrases, sentences and quotations in Italian and Latin. In reply to Felice’s warning of “babel pride,” Piero immediately answers with a Latin quotation from Seneca’s tragedy *Thyestes* – “Pish! *Dimito superos, summa votorum attigi* [I release the gods, for the utmost of my prayers have I attained]” (1.1.60) –, further linking his pride with the overreaching ambition depicted in classical Roman tragedies. The line Piero quotes here is from the final act of *Thyestes*, where Atreus, after sacrificing the sons of his twin brother, Thyestes, to the gods, dismembering them and serving their remains in

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soup to their father, gloats in victory. Another quotation from the same scene also occurs in line 78 of *Antonio and Mellida*: “*O me coelitum excelsissimum!* [Oh, I am highest of heavenly gods]” (1.1.78; Seneca 307). It is clear that Piero is modeled after a Senecan tyrant, who is so arrogant as to consider himself to be even above the gods. Although *Antonio and Mellida* is primarily a romantic comedy, Piero’s role as a Senecan tyrant already anticipates the second part of the duology, when the play itself becomes a Senecan tragedy.

In the climactic scene of *Antonio and Mellida*, the confusion of Babel visits Piero as he experiences severe speech difficulty when he learns that his daughter Mellida has eloped with Antonio:

[To Felice] Keep you the court. The rest stand still, or run, or go, or shout, or search, or scut, or call, or hand, or do – do – do, su – su – su, something. I know not who – who – who, what I do – do – do, nor who – who – who, where I am. (3.2.181-85)

Furthermore, it is not only Piero, the villain, that is affected by the confusion of Babel. In Act 4, scene 1, Antonio and Mellida, both disguised (the former as a mariner and the latter as a page), finally recognise each other; then, they suddenly start to express their joy in Italian:

MELLIDA. Therefore leave loving her. Faugh, faith, methinks
Her beauty is not half so ravishing
As you discourse of. She hath a freckled face,
A low forehead, and a lumpish eye.

ANTONIO. O heaven, that I should hear such blasphemy!
Boy, rogue, thou liest and – [Recognising Mellida]
Spavento del mio core, dolce Mellida,
Di grave morte ristoro vero, dolce Mellida,

Celeste salvatrice, sovrana Mellida

Del mio sperar, trofeo vero Mellida.

MELLIDA. *Diletta e soave anima mia Antonio,*

Godevole bellezza, cortese Antonio.

Signor mio e virginal amore bell' Antonio,

*Gusto dei miei sensi, car' Antonio.*³ (4.1.183-95)

Overhearing their conversation, Lucio, Antonio's page, comments from the sideline: "I think confusion of Babel is fallen upon these lovers, / that they change their language" (4.1.217-18). Speaking from a marginal position close to that of the audience, the page becomes the spokesperson for the confusion and amusement of the audience. At this moment of the drama, which is supposed to be moving, the audience is strangely distanced, denied direct access to the emotion of the characters on stage and refused full sympathy with them. So far, the characters in the play have naturally been engaged in multilingual conversation, using not only English but also Latin and Italian, and the audience have been expected to accept this multilingualism as part of the play's world. Here, however, the otherness of the foreign language is emphasized by the page's comment. As A.J. Hoenselaars argues, the "linguistic alienation" in this scene "operates as an apt correlative to the alienation of an audience largely unversed in the Italian language" (282).

Thus, we may see in the use of multilingualism in *Antonio and Mellida* that the representation of Venice as a new Rome as well as a new Babel in the play functions more than just an interesting piece of local color; it is intimately connected to the plot of the play itself and involves the audience as well. Piero's Roman pride invites the confusion of Babel to Venice. In the final scene of *Antonio and Mellida*, in which the characters are very rapidly reconciled, hardly any Latin or Italian

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is used; all the characters communicate with one another through one common language, English.

4. Trial of Mellida and “Venice the Just”

Antonio's Revenge, the second part of the duology, begins immediately after the ending of *Antonio and Mellida*; while Piero has happily consented to the marriage of Antonio and Mellida in the final scene of the previous play, he reveals his true nature in the opening scene of the second play, having murdered Feliche (Felice in the first play) and placing his body in Mellida's room in the attempt to fake her infidelity. He has also poisoned Andrugio and plans to kill Antonio and marry his mother Maria:

Antonio packed hence, I'll his mother wed,
Then clear my daughter of supposed lust,
Wed her to Florence' heir. O, excellent!
Venice, Genoa, Florence at my beck,
At Piero's nod – [...]. (2.1.13-17)

Here we may see that Piero's motives are as much political as personal; his intention is to rule Italy as a whole by the means of murders and political marriages. Later in the play, he even talks of invading Rome: “I'll conquer Rome, / Pop out the light of bright religion” (4.3.142-43). The play *Antonio's Revenge* deals with the dangers of monstrous tyranny and its possible solutions, which is inevitably linked to the question of justice.

The concept of justice is central to the Venetian plays as a genre and is dealt with in almost every play set in Venice. Both an anonymous *A Knack to Know an Honest Man* and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the earliest plays on the English stage to make extensive use of

Venice as a setting, culminate in climactic court scenes, and the idea of justice and mercy is central to both plays. The Venice of *A Knacke* is ruled by the Duke and senators, who are “well schoold” in legal cases and capable of delivering impartial judgment based not on “teares, / Or sorrow working wordes” but on “the truth and estimate of acts” (130-33). There are three trial scenes in this play, including the lengthy final scene. The Venice of *The Merchant* is similarly ruled by the Duke who presides over the court to settle the dispute between Antonio and Shylock, where he is threatened that the city’s reputation as “Venice the Just” may be at risk depending on his verdict: “If you deny me, fie upon your law: / There is no force in the decrees of Venice,” Shylock exclaims to the Duke (4.1.100-01). Act 1, scene 3 of *Othello* can also be considered an unofficial trial scene, in which the Duke and other senators of Venice attempt to settle the case between Brabantio and Othello concerning the latter’s marriage to Desdemona. Despite Brabantio’s social status as a Venetian senator and Othello’s as an outsider, the Duke remains impartial to both parties; “To vouch this is no proof, / Without more certain and more overt test / Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods / Of modern seeming do prefer against him [Othello]” (1.3.107-10), he replies to Brabantio’s heated accusations of witchcraft. Thus almost every play set in Venice includes a trial scene, suggesting that it was a standard feature that the audiences expected in a Venetian play, and that the idea of justice is one of the central elements associated with stage representations of Venice.

In fact, the dramatic representations of Venetian trials are considerably different from historical practice in Venice at the time; as discussed earlier, it was well known to English travellers and writers of the period that the Duke did not have the authority to give verdict on

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his own. Thomas emphasizes that the Duke's voice is always "ballotted" (78) by other councillors before giving a sentence, and that his opinion counts just as much as another one of his peers, contrary to popular opinion: "whereas many haue reported, that the Duke in ballotting shoulde haue two voices, it is nothing so: for in geuying his voice he hath but one ballot, as all others haue" (78). Similarly, Contarini explains in his treatise the complicated process of the Venetian legal system in which sentences are given through the famous Council of Forty (164-65). On the other hand, the dramatic representations of the Venetian judicial system invests far greater authority in the figure of the Duke, as he becomes the embodiment of Venetian justice on stage.

The trial scene in *Antonio's Revenge*, as Karen Robertson points out, illustrates "the disastrous repercussions to the state of a villain-ruler" when "Piero as criminal, prosecutor, and judge blocks all legal forms of redress in the state" (95). Although the Venetian senators responsible for the proceeding initially ask Piero to "produce apparent proof" of Mellida's guilt (4.3.10) in a similar fashion to their counterparts in other Venetian plays, they remain mute and powerless spectators for the most of the scene while a series of unbelievable events take place on stage: Strotzo, on Piero's orders, falsely accuses Antonio of defaming Mellida (4.3.50-53) and of poisoning his father Andrugio (55-59); Piero strangles Strotzo (65-68); the (false) news of Antonio's death is brought on stage (74-84); Mellida faints at the news and is carried off stage (98-99); her death is reported by Maria later in the scene (160-86). Clearly, the famous system of Venetian justice embodied in the Duke and the senators is rendered ineffective when the Duke himself becomes a tyrant. Although a trial scene is an expected standard feature of a Venetian play, Marston manipulates the stereotype of "Venice the Just"

to depict the effect of tyranny. Piero's actions are contrasted against the ideals of how the Venetian court should function, emphasizing the horrific consequences of having a tyrant to rule the republic.

5. Responses to Tyranny

Antonio's Revenge, more than anything else, is a revenge tragedy, although the play's attitude towards revenge remains elusive, as pointed out by various critics (Spinrad 169). Antonio, incited by his father's ghost to take revenge against the murderous Duke, disguises himself as a fool to bide the time. Finally, with the help of Pandulpho, father of Feliche (Felice in the first part), Alberto, and Maria, Antonio is able to achieve his mission and appease his father's ghost. However, it should be noted that Antonio is not a Venetian and that his motives for murdering Piero are personal rather than political. It is another foreigner, Prince Galeazzo of Florence, who takes care of the political end of the matter; as seen in the dumb show at the beginning of the fifth act ("*GALEATZO betwixt two Senators, reading a paper to them; at which they all make semblance of loathing PIERO and knit their fists at him,*" 5.1.0.6-8) and described by the ghost of Andrugio as "a partner in conspiracy" (5.1.16). Immediately before Antonio and company take action against Piero, Galeatzo assures them of his military and political support: "I have a troop to second your attempt. / The Venice States join hearts unto your hands" (5.5.6-7). Thus, it is repeatedly emphasized in the play that foreign intervention is an essential part of the plot to overthrow the tyrant.

What Marston's Venice offers as a native Venetian response to tyranny is Pandulpho the Stoic, father of Feliche (Felice), who has warned Piero against the "babel pride" in the previous play⁴. Although

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Pandulpho shows an exemplary Stoic virtue which grants him personal victory over Piero, who admits that the Stoic’s “quiet is firmer than [he] can disease” (2.2.103), he is banished from Venice and unable to stop the tyrant without Antonio’s help. Karen Robertson argues that the characterization of Pandulpho as a Stoic shows “the inadequacy of the conventional Stoic response in the face of the expansion of tyranny” (95). In *Antonio’s Revenge*, Marston shows that the good qualities of the myth of Venice-as-Rome are severely undermined by the tyrant both on the public and personal levels: the renowned Venetian legal system is rendered ineffectual by the tyrant, and its best citizen who possesses exemplary Stoic wisdom and self-restraint is banished from the state. The only way to rid Venice of tyrannical rule is to take a drastic measure, to “act beyond the law” (Robertson 95): that is, to go against the very principles that define Venice itself as the civilized state and as an heir to the good tradition of Roman republic. In the last act of *Antonio’s Revenge*, Piero is bound and tortured by Antonio, Pandulpho and Alberto – his tongue is cut off, and he is served the dead limbs of his son Julio on a plate – before being assassinated in a similar fashion to Julius Caesar’s assassination as depicted in Shakespeare’s play:

ANTONIO. Now, pell-mell! Thus the hand of heaven chokes
The throat of murder. This for my father’s blood!

He stabs Piero

PANDULPHO. This for my son! [*Stabs him.*]

ALBERTO. This for them all! [*Stabs him.*]

And this, and this; sink to the heart of hell!

They run all at Piero with their rapiers. (5.5.76-79)

Ultimately, Venice is able to purge itself of Piero’s tyranny because its citizens, incited by Galeatzo and “swoll’n with hate / Against the Duke

for his accursed deeds” (5.1.17-18), support Antonio’s cause. At the end of the play, after Antonio has murdered Piero with the help of Pandulpho and Alberto, Venetian senators enter the scene to commend their action and invite them to rule Venice: “What satisfaction outward pomp can yield, / or chiefest fortunes of the Venice state, / Claim freely” (5.4.23-25). “We are amazed at your benignity,” Antonio answers (28), but he, with the others, declines the offer and chooses to enter a monastery and spend his life in prayer. Although the fact that Venice could manage to rid itself of a tyrant vaguely suggests the image of a strong republic capable of self-purification, Marston makes it clear that Venice could not have achieved it without the help of Antonio, an outsider who killed Piero not for the noble cause of maintaining Venice’s liberty (as Brutus did for Rome) but for the personal motive of avenging the deaths of his father and his lover. The play ends with him and the other conspirators vowing to lead secluded lives, without any mention of Venice’s future as a city-state.

Marston’s *Antonio* plays occupy a significant place in the history of early modern Venetian plays in the sense that they offer a critical commentary of the myth of Venice and that they directly address the question of tyranny and its consequences in the Venetian setting. By juxtaposing the idea of tyranny and the republican ideals of Venice, the plays display an awareness that Venice, while it ostensibly embodies the justice and freedom of the ancient Roman republic, is also subject to the danger of the tyrannical empire. They also question the validity of the traditional Stoic virtue, another inheritance Venice is supposed to have received from ancient Rome, in the face of tyranny. Though often ignored in the discussion of the representations of Venice on stage,

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Marston's plays offer a rich ground for speculation about how the city-state functioned in the minds of the late Elizabethans as a reference point to consider the relevance of *Romanitas* in the contemporary world as well as a possible alternative to their own society.

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- ¹ Andrew Hadfield argues that Spenser's contribution to Lewkenor's book was a testimony of "his growing connection to the earl of Essex immediately before his death," as Essex was a patron to the Lewknor family, of and his leaning towards republicanism in the last years of his life: "Spenser's willingness to be associated in print with Lewkenor's translation indicates the direction in which he appears to have been travelling in the 1590s" (Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* 92).
- ² John Gillies argues that in the poem Venice is depicted as both "Roman" and "Babelesque" (123-25). However, it should not be forgotten that Rome itself is called the second Babel and therefore the concept of "Romanness" includes "Babelesque" elements, too.
- ³ The Italian passage translates as follows: "Terror of my heart, sweet Mellida, / True medicine of sad death, sweet Mellida, / Heavenly saviour, sovereign Mellida / Of my hope, true trophy, Mellida. / Antonio, my beloved and gentle soul, / Courtly Antonio, handsome delight, Fair Antonio, my lord and first love, / Dear Antonio, food for my senses" (*Antonio and Mellida*, 135). Rebecca Yearling argues that the sudden insertion of Italian verse "not only recalls the spontaneous sonnet of *Romeo and Juliet* 1.5.91-104, but trumps it" (87), resulting in the emphasis on the artificiality of accepted theatrical conventions.
- ⁴ Gair supposes that the characters of Felice in *Antonio and Mellida* and Pandulpho in *Antonio's Revenge* were probably performed by the same actor (*Antonio and Mellida* 68, note 144).