Notes

DUKES, DOGI AND MOGÓJNI: GENOA IN JOHN MARSTON’S THE MALCONTENT

To my knowledge, no editor of John Marston’s *The Malcontent* (c. 1603, publ. 1604) thus far seems to have given much thought to a passage in its introductory epistle ‘To the Reader’, where the playwright warns readers ‘that in some things I have willingly erred, as in supposing a Duke of Genoa, and in taking names different from that city’s families’. It is indisputable that the names and events in the play are fictional and do not closely mirror any specific episodes in the history of Genoa. It is also true that Genoa was not a dukedom but an oligarchic republic, as duly noted by George K. Hunter in the Revels Plays edition, whose remark others seem to have followed. However, the oligarchic republic of Genoa was in fact ruled by a *doge*, a title that was commonly translated in early modern English as ‘Duke’, as Marston himself did, for instance, when he listed Doge Piero Sforza among the dramatis personae of *Antonio and Mellida* as ‘Duke of Venice’.

That translating *doge* as ‘Duke’ was common practice is amply testified in works printed in the early modern period. John Florio’s *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598) provides the following, quite confusing definition of *doge*: ‘a title which only the Dukes of Venice and Genoa have’. In *The historie of Italie* (1549), William Thomas points out that ‘the astate [of Genoa] is holden by a Duke, chaungeable euery .ii. yere: who with .viii. gouernours and .viii. proctours assigned vnto hym, ruleth the whole for the tyme’. Thomas refers to the Genoese *doge* as ‘Duke’, and so does George Abbot (1599) in *A briefe description of the whole world*: ‘the State of Genua, commonly called the Genowaies, :: are governed by their Senate: but have a Duke as they have at Venice’. ‘Duke’ as a translation for *doge* also recurs in other plays of the period such as Henry Glaphorne’s *The Ladies’ Privilege* (c. 1637, publ. 1640)—which is coincidently also set in Genoa—and John Fletcher, John Ford, Philip Massinger, and John Webster’s *The Fair Maid of the Inn* (c. 1625, publ. 1647). This very equivalence possibly also lies behind the definition of the State of Genoa as the ‘Dukedom of the Genuensians’ in Gerhard Mercator’s *Atlas* (1635). The potential confusion between *doge* and ‘Duke’ may have been further increased by the fact that the public palace of the *doge* was (and still is) called in Italian *Palazzo Ducale—ducale* being the adjective derived from both *doge* and *duca* (the Italian for ‘Duke’)—a building that Fynes Moryson at least twice mentions as the ‘Dukes Pallace’ in his *Itinerary* (1617).

Consequently, it seems plausible to infer that rather than inventing a dukedom of Genoa from scratch, Marston is likely to have decided to play with the potential confusion between *doge* and ‘Duke’—of which he must have been aware—as far as to transform the republic of Genoa into a dukedom pervaded by corruption, dishonesty, and moral debauchery, something which would indeed have not been very difficult to envision for Marston, especially if he was familiar—as it is more than plausible to imagine, given that his mother Maria Guars was a Florentine—with a proverbial saying about Genoa that had

2 Marston, *Malcontent*, 4n5.
apparently been coined by the citizens of the Republic of Pisa after the defeat against their sworn enemies of the Republic of Genoa at the battle of Meloria in 1284. This proverb is reported by several early modern English writers, among whom it will suffice to quote Moryson:

It is proverbially said of this City; Montagne senza legni, Mar’ senza pesci, huominii senza fede, donne senza vergogna, Mori bianchi, Genoa superba:
That is, Mountaines without wood, Sea without fish, Men without faith, Weomen without shame, white Moores, Genoa the proud.10

At all events, what can be established beyond doubt is that Marston did not invent the political instability of Genoa. He did not need to. Pieces of information about it were abundantly available in Thomas’s Historie:

About this tyme were so many commocions in the citte, for chosing of theyr Dukes, that I thinke there was neuer so muche alteracion of rulers in one cōmon welth for the tyme. ∴ as longe as the rule of the common wealth consisted in the wil of the multitude, neuer was so inconstant an astate as that of Genoa: For amongst other in the chaunge betwene Domenyke di Campo Fregoso and Nicolas Guarco were .iii. Dukes in a daie: Fregoso deposed in the mornyng, and Adorno incontinently made, and at after noone Adorno deposed, and Guarco made.11

Genoa’s extreme—and, to be sure, almost darkly (if unwittingly) comical in Thomas’s report—political instability made it an excellent fit for the events depicted in The Malcontent, where a series of political coups and devious machinations bring about a rapid-fire alternation of Dukes, as that title is successively held by Altofronto, Pietro Jacomo, Mendoza, and Altofronto again, in a not dissimilar fashion from the events reported by Thomas.

However, these might not have been the only reasons why Marston decided to set a play titled The Malcontent in Genoa rather than anywhere else in Italy. On the contrary, it seems feasible to trace Marston’s choice to the fact that the Genoese have been renowned since the Middle Ages for their unmistakable mogóño. Mogognà is an onomatopoeic verb in the Genoese dialect that defines a mixture of grumbling and grousing expressing discontent (in Italian, malcontento), which is so distinctive that this word passed from the Genoese dialect into the Italian language as mugugno (verb: mugugnare). The Genoese’s customary mogóño seems to have been well known in Europe as early as the late Middle Ages, insofar as the sailors of the glorious Republic of Genoa could apparently be hired through two different types of contract, namely con diritto di mogóño (with the right of mogóño) and senza diritto di mogóño (without the right of mogóño). Legend has it that the vast majority of the Genoese sailors chose to be paid less as long as they could vent their discontent at liberty. Traces of this preference still populate everyday Genoese life through sundry proverbs in the local dialect conveying approximately the same idea:

Çinque frânci de mèno ma o mogóño. (Five francs less but the mogóño.)
L’è mègio ‘na xätta de menèstra de mèno e a libertæ de mogognà. (It is better to have a bowl of soup less but to retain the freedom to mogognà.)
‘Na palância de mèno, ma libertæ de mogóño. (Less money but the liberty of mogóño.)
Sènsa vin se nàvega, sènsa mogóño no. (Without wine you can sail, without mogóño you can’t.)12

In short, Genoa’s reputation as a place swarming with chronic malcontents may have had a role—however limited—in Marston’s decision to set The Malcontent in that very city. In this sense, it is enthralling to consider that a 2002 school production of the play performed in Savona—another main city in Liguria, the same region where Genoa is located—was aptly titled O mugugnone (the man who always

11 Thomas, Historie, 175–6.
12 I am grateful to Franco Bampi for advice concerning the grafìa oficìa (official spelling) of the proverbs in the Genoese dialect.
mogónta). As is always the case with this kind of conjectural reconstructions, it is impossible to find indisputable evidence in support of this argument. Yet, I am confident that the notion that this particular character trait traditionally associated with the Genoese as early as the Middle Ages may have been among the factors behind Marston’s choice of Genoa as a setting for a play titled *The Malcontent* is at the very least reasonably plausible and deserves scholarly attention.

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