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The Duchess of Padua: An Italianate Play by Oscar Wilde

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Abstract

This article re-examines *The Duchess of Padua* (1883) by Oscar Wilde within the framework of Italianate drama, Irish cultural politics, and gender studies. It argues that Renaissance Italy functions less as a historical setting than as a symbolic space through which Wilde explores modern concerns such as political violence, dispossession, and social injustice. Focusing on Guido's rejection of revenge and Beatrice's assumption of agency, the essay demonstrates how Wilde subverts the conventions of revenge tragedy to articulate an Anglo-Irish ambivalence toward violence and an emerging ethics grounded in love, restraint, and moral transformation.

Keywords: Gender and Agency, Irish Politics, Italianate Drama, Oscar Wilde, *The Duchess of Padua*

1. Introduction: Wilde and Italy

One may ask why Oscar Wilde, at the beginning of his career as a dramatist, chose Italy – specifically Renaissance Italy – as the setting for one of his earliest plays, *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), a revenge tragedy that contrasts sharply with his later theatrical production. Italy, in fact, occupies a central – though still insufficiently examined¹ – place in Wilde's life and works, functioning not merely as a source of aesthetic inspiration, but as a recurring imaginative and symbolic landscape.

¹ The reception and influence of Wilde in Italy have been exhaustively studied by Masolino D'Amico and Rita Severi while most other studies concerning Wilde and Italy are of a biographical nature, regarding Wilde's experiences in southern Italy in the last three years of his life (e.g. Arcara 2001, Dall'Orto 1997). On the influence of Italy in Wilde's works, Mackie (2012), referring specifically to *The Duchess of Padua*, shows how Wilde uses Italy as a stylised aesthetic past – not a realistic Italy, but a theatrical, art-historical construct. Manganiello (1989) focuses on Dante and Wilde, and Badin (2018) on his early poems.

Wilde's fascination with Italy was not exclusively literary but also deeply experiential. It was shaped by the formative summers he spent there, by his engagement with Renaissance culture during his Oxford years, when he avidly studied John Ruskin and Walter Pater, whose *The Renaissance* he dubbed as "my golden book" that "had such a strange influence over my life" (Wilde 2000, 735). Italy also played a significant role in Wilde's spiritual development, particularly in relation to his attraction to Catholicism. Family connections further reinforced this interest: his mother, Jane Frances Elgee Wilde, who wrote under the Italian *nom de plume* "Francesca Speranza", claimed Italian ancestry through the Algiati family (whence Elgee)².

Unsurprisingly, Wilde's early poetry contains frequent references to Italian history, landscapes, artists, and literary figures (Badin 2018). In a letter to More Adey (Wilde 2000, 1129), the Irish writer describes Dante Alighieri as the supreme "modern poet". In *De Profundis*, written during his imprisonment, he repeatedly refers to the *Divine Comedy* associating his own experience of suffering and moral introspection with the spiritual trajectory of the Italian poet. As Manganiello observes, Dante provides Wilde with a model in which suffering is "transmuted into artistic vision" (1989, 398).

Thanks to Pater and to the fascination of Early Modern English theatrical production, Wilde chose the Renaissance for his debut on stage³. Despite the lack of success of *The Duchess of Padua*, he returned to Renaissance Italy as the setting for another blank verse drama, *A Florentine Tragedy*, drafted between 1894 and 1895, and found in fragmentary form among his papers after his death. In his later days, the Italian peninsula and Sicily became both a refuge and a place of exile for the disgraced writer⁴. Taken together, these elements testify to Wilde's sustained engagement with Italian culture, history, and literary myth.

2. *The Italian Myth in English Culture and Its Role in The Duchess of Padua*

Wilde's decision to set *The Duchess of Padua* and *A Florentine Tragedy* in Renaissance Italy was also shaped by a long-standing Anglophone tradition that associated Italy with political intrigue, moral excess, and heightened theatricality. Eager to establish himself within the theatrical world, Wilde initially turned to tragic sublimity in an exotic historical setting, rather than to the contemporary drawing-room comedy that would later define his reputation. His ambition led him to choose an anachronistic genre and style and emulate – at times closely – the canonical figures of the British stage, including Shakespeare and the authors of Jacobean revenge tragedy, as well as Victor Hugo's historical drama and Shelley's *The Cenci* (Donohue 2013, 34-39). Even the title of the play signals a dual lineage, invoking both Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612) and Hugo's *Angelo, tyran de Padoue* (1835)⁵.

² His mother, Speranza, had changed her name from Frances into Francesca "regarding", as Ellmann writes, "the new name as a brilliant vestige of the Elgee family's origins in Italy, where – according to what she maintained was a family tradition – they had been called Algiati. From Algiati to Alighieri was an easy backward leap, and Dante could not save himself from becoming Jane Elgee's ancestor" (1988, 5).

³ Wilde's very first play was *Vera: or, the Nihilists* (1880) which was staged in New York in 1883.

⁴ Florence was where Wilde reunited with Lord Alfred Douglas after the outbreak of scandal, while Naples served as a temporary haven following his release from prison. His latter day erotic adventures during his many visits to Naples, Sicily, Genoa and other locations are documented in his letters. In total, Wilde's nine visits to the country underscore its enduring importance in his personal and creative life.

⁵ Wilde had initially planned to call the play *The Duchess of Florence* and the stage set he imagined for Act 1 (a market place and a church with a façade in black and white marble) evoked piazza S. Croce. Probably wanting to emulate Hugo's *Angelo, tyran de Padoue*, (1835) he changed the title forgetting to adapt the setting.

In this sense, *The Duchess of Padua* is less concerned with Italy as a historical reality than as a literary construct. As a pseudo-Elizabethan/Jacobean drama modelled on revenge tragedy, it occupies a revealing position within Wilde's complex imaginative engagement with the country. Renaissance Italy functions here as a vehicle through which issues of modern concern are explored for, as he explained to the actress Mary Anderson, the play aims to demonstrate that "the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form" (Wilde 2000, 197). Beneath its ostensibly archaic setting, the play addresses themes such as retributive justice, social inequality, female agency and political violence acquiring at times an "Irish dimension" (Small 2000, 67) and participating in what Robert Haslam (2023) calls "the Irish wars", i.e. the ongoing debate over Wilde's Irishness⁶.

Similarly, Gregory Mackie argues that Wilde's play seeks its modern relevance by staging a historically reconstructed Renaissance world that functions less as a realistic setting than as a medium for articulating contemporary political concerns. In this sense, the play's "theatrical archaeology" may be read as analogous to nationalist discourse, which similarly constructs an aestheticized past in order to give symbolic form to modern experiences of dispossession and political grievance (2012, *passim*).

By revisiting *The Duchess of Padua* through the combined lenses of Italianate drama, feminist critique, and Irish cultural politics, this paper contributes to a relatively limited body of scholarship seeking to reassess the play's significance. It argues that Wilde's revision of the revenge tragedy – culminating in Guido's rejection of violence and in Beatrice's assumption of the role of avenger – reflects not only aesthetic and ethical concerns, but also a distinctly Anglo-Irish ambivalence toward political violence and an emerging attention to female agency. In projecting contemporary debates onto an Italian setting, Wilde anticipates key elements of his later social thought while simultaneously engaging with issues central to late nineteenth-century Ireland.

3. Composition, Production and Early Reception

The Duchess of Padua was written in Paris in 1882, shortly after Wilde's American lecture tour during which he sought to establish connections within the theatrical world. Completed in March 1883, the play represents a deliberate attempt to engage with the long-standing tradition of Italianate drama in English literature and to establish the author as participant in the grand tradition of British theatre. His ambitions for the play were closely tied to the American actress Mary Anderson, whom he envisioned in the role of the Duchess.

Wilde's correspondence with Anderson reveals both the scale of his aspirations and his acute awareness of theatrical prestige. He imagined a collaboration that would elevate Anderson to the stature of Rachel (the nickname of Elisa Félix, the star of the Comédie-Française) and himself to that of Victor Hugo, whose historical plays clearly served as an important model⁷. In one letter, Wilde expressed the hope that the play would enable them to "simultaneously become immortal in one night" (2000, 179), while in another he described it as "the masterpiece of all my literary work, the *chef-d'œuvre* of my youth" (196).

Despite Wilde's enthusiasm, Anderson ultimately declined the role, a decision that significantly undermined his theatrical plans. The reasons for her refusal remain a matter of critical

⁶ For discussions of Wilde and Irishness, cf. Coakley 1994; Kiberd 1995; Haslam 2014, 2023; Markey 2014; Killeen 2015; Eltis 2017.

⁷ "I doubt not for a moment that I can and will write for you a play which, created for you, and inspired by you, shall give you the glory of a Rachel and may yield me the fame of a Hugo" (Wilde 2000, 179).

debate, Donohue suggests that in addition to the play's perceived outdatedness, its imitativeness may have discouraged the actress: it appeared indebted to a "brand of post-Shakespearean dramaturgy", derivative in language, characterization and plot, "a type of drama so pervasive in the culture, and so overlaid with proto-Shakespearean characterizational and rhetorical strategies" to the point of bordering on plagiarism (2013, 25-26).

What was perceived at the time as excessive derivativeness may, from a modern perspective, be reinterpreted as a sort of intertextual experimentation, in which quotation and allusion function as deliberate strategies for situating the work within a broader literary tradition. Wilde himself appears to have adopted this view, since, as Donohue points out, he was "blithely unconcerned about how recognizable echoes of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and other plays in the grand procession of British dramatic tradition" would be taken by his audience (2013, 51). For him, such echoes signaled his inclusion within the British dramatic lineage; for Anderson, however, they constituted a serious flaw.

The play was eventually staged in New York in 1891 by Lawrence Barrett at the Broadway Theatre under the title *Guido Ferranti*. This production shifted the focus from the Duchess to the male protagonist, altering the interpretative balance of the work. Wilde's authorship was not advertised⁸, and although the production was treated with a degree of respect, it ran for only three weeks and failed to achieve either critical acclaim or commercial success. Subsequent adaptations – including a German translation staged in Hamburg in 1904 (Schroeder 2007, 58-71) – met with similarly limited reception, reinforcing the play's reputation as a theatrical failure. In the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in Donohue's reckoning, there were only some amateurish College performances and very few professional English-language productions, the latest being in 2010 at the Pentameters Theatre in London (2013, 16-17). Subsequent musical adaptations, two operas and a symphonic work incorporating fragments of the play⁹, did not help its reputation, unlike what happened with *A Florentine Tragedy* given some fame by Zemlinsky's opera *Eine Florentinische Tragödie* (1915-1916).

For over twenty-five years *The Duchess of Padua* remained unpublished. Wilde had twenty copies privately printed at his own expense but the first official publication appeared only in 1908 when it was included in Ross's edition of the collected works (Donohue 2013, 51).

Wilde later distanced himself from the play. In a letter to Robert Ross dated 29 July 1898, he described it as "unfit for publication", adding that it was "the only one of my works that comes under that category", though conceding that "there are some good lines in it" (2000, 1091).

4. The Duchess of Padua: *Plot and Italianate Framework*

Set against the backdrop of the violent rivalries that characterized Renaissance Italian city-states, *The Duchess of Padua* centres on a carefully orchestrated plot of revenge. The protagonist, Guido Ferranti, seeks to avenge the murder of his father, a crime for which the Duke of Padua is responsible. The structural and thematic debt to *Hamlet* is immediately apparent: like Shakespeare's prince, Guido is initially driven by a filial obligation to exact vengeance, yet becomes increasingly hesitant as he confronts the implications of his task, particularly after falling in love.

⁸ *The New York Tribune* identified, however, Wilde as the author of the play much to his annoyance, prompting him to write that all art should be anonymous.

⁹ The play inspired two operas, one by the American composer Jane Van Etten (*Guido Ferranti*, staged at the Auditorium Theater of Chicago in 1914) and another by Maurice Le Boucher, *La Duchesse de Padoue* performed at l'Opéra de Paris in 1831. Four fragments from the play were composed in *A Symphony of Sorrows* by Henry Muldrow recorded in 1999 (Englebert 2018).

Rather than killing the Duke outright, Guido resolves to pursue a more elaborate form of revenge. Acting on the advice of the sinister Moranzone, he enters the Duke's service in order to gain his trust and ultimately destroy him in a manner that will inflict psychological as well as physical suffering. The aim is not merely to kill but to do so after revealing the motive for the betrayal by a person the Duke trusted, thereby intensifying the moral impact of the act – a strategy consistent with the conventions of Renaissance revenge tragedy, in which delay and subtlety heighten both suspense and cruelty.

While residing at court and awaiting the opportune moment to act, Guido becomes emotionally entangled with the Duke's wife, Beatrice. This development introduces a destabilizing element into the revenge plot, transforming the play into melodrama as personal desire comes into conflict with the imperatives of vengeance. When the moment arrives, Guido – again echoing Hamlet and the praying Claudius – finds himself unable to carry out the murder. In a decisive departure from generic expectation, the act of violence is instead performed by Beatrice who, weary of her subjugation and determined to assert control over her fate, kills her husband.

Guido's response to this act is one of horror and rejection. Interpreting Beatrice's behaviour as transgressive and unwomanly, he repudiates her, thereby reasserting the gender norms that her action has disrupted. In retaliation, Beatrice accuses Guido of the murder, leading to his imprisonment and condemnation. The final act introduces a shift toward reconciliation: the Duchess, now repentant, attempts to save Guido by exchanging clothes with him so that he can flee to Venice according to a plan she has meticulously organized. Meanwhile she takes the poison that had been prepared to spare him the ignominy of a public execution. Witnessing her self-sacrifice, Guido, overcome with love, stabs himself; recalling the tragic double deaths of Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde and similar narratives. The play thus concludes with the simultaneous destruction of both protagonists, sealing their union in death, in a scene evoking Michelangelo's "Pietà" or Wagner's "Liebestod".

The Italian setting of *The Duchess of Padua*, shaped by stereotypes and melodramatic conventions, is crucial to the play's initial adherence to the conventions of revenge tragedy, particularly its emphasis on the 'subtleties of evil' a capacity for calculated, aesthetically refined cruelty. Guido's planned revenge conforms to this model in its emphasis on delay, indirection and psychological manipulation. Within this framework, revenge is not simply an act of personal retaliation but an ethical obligation governed by a code of honour imposed by Moranzone. The more elaborate and theatrically staged the act, the greater its impact and perceived artistic value. Wilde deliberately adopts those conventions in order to establish generic expectations that he will subsequently undermine.

5. *From Revenge to Ethics: Wilde's Subversion of the Italianate Plot*

Wilde's tragedy, however, undergoes a decisive reversal roughly halfway through, marking a departure from the logic of revenge tragedy and the emergence of what may be termed the play's "modern ideas". Although Guido initially appears committed to fulfilling the traditional revenge script, he ultimately rejects it under the pressure of a newly articulated ethical framework.

His love for the Duchess forces him to recognize that killing the Duke would no longer constitute pure vengeance for his father's death, but would instead become an opportunistic act that conveniently removes an obstacle to his own desire. This realization prompts Guido to refuse to carry out the murder, despite Moranzone's insistence that he complete the ritualized act of vengeance by returning with the Duke's heart "upon the blade" (Wilde 2013, Act III, 76). The moment represents a conscious ethical rupture with the Italianate revenge code.

Guido's refusal inaugurates a new code of behaviour that stands in deliberate contrast to the old framework. Wilde employs the conventions of revenge tragedies precisely in order to dramatize their insufficiency, using the genre as a foil against which Guido's moral transformation can be staged. The shift has been interpreted in religious terms, as a movement from the *lex talionis* of the Old Testament toward the Christian ethics of forgiveness associated with the New Testament. Guido explicitly frames his decision in theological language, asserting that "vengeance is God's" (Wilde 2013, Act III, 54) and must not be usurped by human agents. This moral stance gains additional resonance when read in light of Wilde's well-documented attraction to Catholicism.

Yet Guido's refusal to kill the Duke is not motivated solely by religious ethics; it is also articulated as a matter of civilisation and style. He distances himself from what he characterizes as barbaric practices insisting that true gentility would never sanction the stealthy murder of an old man in his bed, regardless of provocation. That "great gentleman" that was his father would not "be glad to see me coming, / This old man's blood still hot upon my hands" (Act III, 50-51). He would never "have crept at night-time, like a common thief, / And stabbed an old man sleeping in his bed, / However he had wronged him [...]" (Act III, 80-84). Revenge, as Wilde redefines it, must be consistent with a code of honour that privileges dignity over bloodshed. This concern with aesthetic and moral self-fashioning underscores Wilde's broader critique of violence as both ethically degrading and stylistically vulgar.

Equally significant is the role of love in prompting Guido's change of heart. He comes to understand that violence would contaminate his love for the Duchess, which he conceives as a transformative and almost sacred force: "When a man loves a woman, then he knows / God's secret, and the secret of the world / [...] but if bloody murder / Knock at the Palace gate and is let in, / Love like a wounded thing creeps out and dies" (Act III, 115-122). Love, in this vision, is fundamentally incompatible with murder. Wilde thus constructs love as an ethical principle that supersedes the imperative of revenge, reinforcing the play's departure from its generic origins and articulating a more modern moral consciousness. His love for the Duchess forces him to confront the possibility that killing the Duke would no longer constitute an act of filial justice but rather an opportunistic removal of a rival.

At the thematic level, too, the play extends beyond the conventional framework of revenge tragedy. While it draws on the familiar motif of the corruption of innocence within a "venal and iniquitous world" (Donohue 2013, 26), it also develops a broader critique of power, injustice, and social inequality. The arrogance of authority, the experience of dispossession, the persistence of poverty, and the tensions surrounding gender and agency, all contribute to a more nuanced and politically resonant text.

The Italian setting plays a crucial role in enabling this critique. By displacing issues of land, justice, resistance, and violence onto a foreign stage, Wilde is able to explore their moral complexities of political violence without directly invoking contemporary political realities. This strategy allows the play to operate simultaneously within and beyond the conventions of Italianate drama, transforming what might otherwise appear as a derivative exercise in historical writing, into a vehicle for cultural and ideological reflection, a symbolic engagement with Irish concerns.

6. *Italianate Drama and Irish Political Allegory*

One of the most notable dimensions of *The Duchess of Padua* lies, indeed, in its capacity to function as a site of symbolic translocation, in which Irish political tensions are refracted through an Italian setting. Italy operates as a surrogate space that allows Oscar Wilde to explore themes of

injustice, dispossession, poverty, tyranny, and retributive violence without invoking the charged realities of Ireland under British rule. This strategy reflects a broader tendency in nineteenth-century Irish writing, whereby geographically distant settings – Italy, Greece, India, or the Caribbean – serve as coded arenas for the articulation of colonial critique¹⁰. As Declan Kiberd observes, Irish writers frequently displaced “the condition of Ireland into other countries, there to be decoded by a knowing audience” (1995, 327). Beneath this foreign veil, recognisably Irish concerns emerge. In *The Duchess of Padua*, while the conventions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italianate drama are fully deployed, they are inflected with what might be termed an “Irish twist”.

This inflection is particularly evident in what is arguably the play’s most original feature: the reversal of the revenge code. Guido’s decision to settle his score with the Duke psychologically rather than through immediate violence marks a significant departure from the expected logic of revenge tragedy. Although he initially rejoices in the prospect of vengeance, when the decisive moment arrives he repeatedly declares to Moranzone, “I am resolved not to kill this man” (Wilde 2013, Act III, 35, 42, 45).

The play’s crucial reversal suggests that conflict can be averted and violence redirected through moral confrontation rather than bloodshed:

I purpose to ascend to the Duke’s chamber
And as he lies asleep lay on his breast
This dagger and this writing; when he wakes
Then he will know who held him in his power
And slew him not: this is the noblest vengeance
Which I can take. (Act III, 59-64)

6. *Anglo-Irish Ambivalence toward Political Violence*

Although Guido initially conforms to the stereotype of the Italian avenger in his desire for cruel retribution, he also reflects the sensibility of his creator. Like many Anglo-Irish writers, Wilde remains acutely responsive to the intertwined themes of usurpation and retaliation. The injustice experienced by the dispossessed, and their attempts to redress it – even violently – were often viewed with ambivalence: sympathy for the avenger coexisted with anxiety about the consequences of vengeance. As Jarlath Killeen argues, representations of dispossession and landlord tyranny occupy a central place in Irish cultural memory and most of Wilde’s work is “suffused with references to Ireland and the Irish Question” (2015, 426). Wilde’s plot mirrors this ambivalence, moving from an apparent endorsement of Guido’s cause to a moral reorientation, in which the traditional code of honour is revised under the influence of love and ethical reflection.

Influenced in part by the nationalist sympathies of his mother, Speranza, Wilde could readily draw parallels between Ireland and Renaissance Italy – both marked by arrogance, dispossession, and inequality. Yet he stops short of endorsing the violent justice advocated by Moranzone. As Gregory Mackie argues, Wilde’s early drama reveals “a tension between inherited melodramatic structures and a more modern ethical hesitation about the legitimacy of revenge” (2012, 228-229).

¹⁰ Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) wrote about Greece (*Woman or Ida of Athens*, 1809), India (*The Missionary: An Indian Tale*, 1811), Belgium (*The Princess. Or the Beguine*, 1835); Thomas Moore about India (*Lalla Rookh*, 1817) and Matthew Lewis (*Journal of a West India Proprietor*, 1834) about the Caribbean.

The reversal of the revenge code is closely tied to Wilde's particular form of nationalism: that of a Protestant Irishman conscious of his precarious position and wary of revolutionary violence. Guido's change of heart may therefore be read as a speculative political allegory, projecting a resolution to the Irish Question in which justice is achieved without bloodshed and the tyrant is brought to recognition rather than destruction. In this sense, the play gestures toward a constitutional solution, implicitly resonant with the aspirations of Home Rule.

Guido's refusal to kill, thus, becomes an imaginative proposal for peaceful political resolution. Beneath the dramatic *coup de théâtre* lies Wilde's belief that change must occur from within existing structures rather than through their violent overthrow. This ethical trajectory mirrors the Irish political context of Wilde's formative years, particularly the tension between Fenian militancy and constitutional nationalism under Charles Stewart Parnell¹¹. The play may therefore be read as an allegory of the transition from revolutionary violence to parliamentary reform.

7. *Dispossession*

Another central issue in the play, which acquires a distinctly Irish resonance, is dispossession. The revelation of Guido's lineage – as the son of a noble ruler unjustly overthrown – echoes recurrent motifs in Irish cultural memory, particularly those associated with the loss of land and sovereignty. His father, the Duke of Parma, is presented as a figure of legitimate authority, betrayed in exchange for “cities, fiefs and principalities / Vineyards, and lands” (Wilde 2013, Act I, 127-128). This narrative parallels stories regarding the dispossessed Gaelic aristocracy or later victims of landlordism.

Such motifs are also prominent in early nationalist fiction, such as Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1999 [1806]), where The Prince's dispossession serves as a critique of colonial authority. The emphasis on usurpation, property confiscation, and betrayal in Wilde's play closely mirrors historical patterns that shaped Irish experience, particularly under colonial land policies.

As critics have noted, Irish cultural identity in the nineteenth century was deeply structured by narratives of grievance, with dispossession functioning as a central organizing motif. The imaginary Italy of the play becomes a screen upon which tensions related to oppression, justice, and resistance are projected. The figure of the Duke, as the prototype of the Italian villain, occupies a focal position within this political reading.

8. *The Duke as a Colonial Figure*

While the Duke conforms to the conventions of the Italianate villain, he also bears a striking resemblance to literary representations of the Anglo-Irish landlord. Their authority lacks moral legitimacy; their wealth derives from exploitation; and their relationship to their subjects is marked by contempt rather than by a sense of responsibility. The Duke is a figure whose “vileness comes from his intellect”, emphasizing his cynical philosophical detachment, as Wilde wrote to Anderson in his exhaustive description of the play (2000, 196). This characterization aligns him with the stage type of the Machiavel, traditionally associated with Italian political culture in early modern English drama¹². However, Wilde complicates this model by endowing

¹¹ W.J. McCormack's essay “Wilde and Parnell” (1998) highlights the affinities between the two men.

¹² In Early Modern England, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, a complex analysis of power, was taken (on hearsay because it had not yet been translated into English) as a manual of political cynicism and manipulation. The stage type known as “the Machiavel”, usually an Italian, given the reputation Italy had in England, appears in many plays.

the Duke with a distinctly modern (and Wildean) mode of expression: his reliance on paradox, irony, and epigrammatic speech often associated with the stereotypical British gentleman.

The Duke's inverts common values presenting Guido's honesty as ostentation (Wilde 2013, Act I, 262-265), Beatrice's goodness as annoying, (the Duchess is "worse than ugly" she is "good") and poverty as the doors to heaven:

If you are poor,
Are you not blessed in that? Why, Poverty
Is one of the Christian virtues. (Act II, 63-65)

Mocking the cries of the starving crowd as a "serenade" before ordering them to be shot – combines epigrammatic wit with brutal authoritarianism:

You see, Lord Cardinal, how my people love me,
This is their serenade, I like it better
Than the soft murmurs of the amorous lute;
Is it not sweet to listen to? (*Another yell*)
I fear
They have become a little out of tune,
So I must tell my men to fire on them.
I cannot bear bad music! (Act II, 8-14)

The Duke's wit reveals the deep hypocrisy at the heart of political discourse which he emphasizes through "sprezzatura", that characteristic elegant detachment of the Renaissance gentleman. It also, unsettlingly, resembles that of Wilde's own comic characters. The rhetorical strategy of inverting conventional moral values – presenting cruelty as refinement, injustice as necessity, and oppression as benevolence – anticipates Wilde's later use of paradox as a tool of social critique. However, read within an Irish context, such behaviour is closely tied with nationalist depictions of colonial authority.

9. Land, Poverty, and Social Justice

The play's engagement with poverty and social injustice further reinforces its Irish resonance. The suffering of the populace – particularly in the scene of the starving tenants in Act II – strongly evokes post-Famine Ireland. Wilde's depiction of deprivation reflects contemporary debates about land reform and the responsibilities of landlords.

In a letter to Mary Anderson (23 March 1883), Wilde explicitly acknowledged the modern relevance of such scenes, which far from appearing anachronistic would speak to the hearts and minds of an audience that would recognise parallels with contemporary social conditions:

I do not know how it is in New York, but in London where the misery is terrible among the poor, and where the sympathy for them is growing every day, such speeches as the one about the children dying in the lanes, or the people sleeping under the arches of the bridges, cannot fail to bring down the house: they will not expect to find in an Italian tragedy modern life: but the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form. (Wilde 2000, 197)

The Duke's treatment of his subjects is marked by a callous indifference that borders on cruelty. When confronted with complaints that the people are forced to eat bread made of chaff, he responds with cynical irony, suggesting that such food is suitable even for his horses. Simi-

larly, he dismisses the grievance of the population's lack of access to clean water ("They should drink wine; water is quite unwholesome", Wilde 2013, Act II, 45) and answers flippantly to the people's remark that taxes are too high for buying wine: "Then you should bless the taxes / Which make you temperate" (Act II, 48-49). This kind of remarks exposes magnifying them the grotesque contrast between the views of ruling authority and lived reality.

By contrast, the Duchess emerges as an advocate for the oppressed, articulating a powerful critique of inequality. Her speeches evoke urban poverty in terms that resonate strongly with Irish socio-political conditions, positioning her as a quasi-Land League figure.

There are many citizens of Padua
Who in vile tenements live; so full of holes,
That the chill rain, the snow[,] and the rude blast,
Are tenants also with them; others sleep
Under the arches of the public bridges
All through the autumn nights, till the wet mist
Stiffens their limbs, and fevers come, and so—
DUKE And so they go to Abraham's bosom, Madam,
They should thank me for sending them to Heaven,
If they are wretched here. (Act II, 66-75)

This social dimension appears also in Wilde's broader intellectual commitments. In works such as *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891) and in many of his fairy tales (for example "The Selfish Giant" or "The Happy Prince"), Wilde consistently articulates a critique of property relations and advocates for greater social equity. *The Duchess of Padua* may thus be seen as an early dramatic expression of these concerns, embedding social critique within the conventions of historical tragedy.

In this synthesis, whereby the Duke of Padua ultimately embodies a convergence of types – the Machiavel of Italianate tragedy, the paradox-maker of Wildean comedy, and the Ascendancy landlord of Irish nationalist discourse¹³ – the Italian setting becomes a framework through which contemporary political tensions can be explored. The conflict between Guido and the Duke, therefore, exceeds the bounds of personal revenge, acquiring a distinctly Irish resonance as a symbolic confrontation between dispossessed subject and colonial authority. In this sense, the Italianate villain reveals himself to be, in crucial ways, more Irish than Italian.

10. Gender and the Question of Agency

Equally significant is the play's treatment of gender, particularly in the figure of the Duchess¹⁴. Beatrice's transformation from victimized wife to active agent of violence represents a striking departure from both Early Modern conventions and Victorian gender norms. Initially defined by patriarchal structures, she ultimately disrupts them through her decision to murder the Duke. In assuming the role of avenger, she challenges both genre expectations and contemporary assumptions about femininity.

¹³ Generations of irresponsible landlords are represented in Maria Edgeworth's novels *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *The Absentee* (1812). A darker vision of landlordism appears in *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1820) by William Carleton or in *Knockagow* (1873) by Charles Kickham.

¹⁴ The transgressive role of the Duchess has been fully analysed in Worth (1983) and in an MA thesis by Minion Weber (2020).

We first encounter the Duchess after the Duke has ordered his guards to fire upon citizens protesting for bread. In a striking gesture of resistance, she “has gone forth into the square, / And stands between the people and the guard / And will not let them shoot” (Wilde 2013, Act II, 22-24). Her intervention does not merely interrupt the Duke’s command; it symbolically reconfigures the locus of authority by placing her body between state violence and the suffering populace. When the Duke dismisses the people’s plight as divinely ordained, she acts autonomously, instructing her almoner to distribute her wealth and provide bread. At this stage, however, her actions remain compatible with the gendered economy of Victorian philanthropy.

Philanthropy, as Wilde repeatedly suggests, is itself ideologically ambivalent. While conventionally associated to feminine virtue, it also functions as a mechanism that stabilizes, rather than challenges, structural inequality. In “The Soul of Man under Socialism”, Wilde critiques charitable intervention as a form of ideological containment: “The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible” (1994, 1079). From this perspective, Beatrice’s initial gestures of charity can be understood not as resistance but as participation in what might be termed a “compensatory economy of suffering” – one that alleviates symptoms without addressing systemic injustice. Her early role thus corresponds to what feminist critics have identified as the socially sanctioned sphere of female moral influence, a domain that remains carefully circumscribed and politically non-threatening.

Beatrice’s trajectory becomes theoretically significant when she moves beyond this sanctioned role into a discourse of rights. “The poor have rights you cannot touch” (Wilde 2013, Act II, 166), she declares, invoking a proto-political language that disrupts both feudal hierarchy and gendered expectations. Her defiant response to the Duke’s threat – “Sir, by what right?” (Act II, 202-205) – challenges not only the legitimacy of his authority but transforms herself from an object within patriarchal structures into a speaking subject capable of contesting them.

A similar shift is evident in her engagement with what Victorian discourse termed the “Woman Question”. Beatrice’s denunciation of marriage as a form of commodification – “We are their chattels, and their common slaves” (Act II, 224-225) – articulates a critique that prefigures contemporary feminist analyses of women’s legal and economic subordination. Her language of exchange – “bought... sold, and bartered” (Act II, 227-228) – foregrounds the circulation of women as property within patriarchal economies.

Beatrice’s transgression becomes fully legible when understood through the lens of gender performativity. She not only speaks in ways that exceed normative femininity, but also enacts behaviours conventionally coded as masculine: wooing Guido and assuming strategic control over their shared future not only by planning their escape but by removing the main obstacle. Wilde’s early drama repeatedly stages such inversions, a tendency that Declan Kiberd interprets as evidence of his “profound scorn for the extreme Victorian division between male and female” (1995, 39). In this sense, Beatrice does not simply invert gender roles but exposes their constructedness. Her language – “Sit down here... that I may run my fingers through your hair” (Wilde 2013, Act II, 344-348) – appropriates the rhetoric of masculine desire, thereby unsettling the binary logic that underpins Victorian gender ideology.

The act of murder marks the culmination of this trajectory and invites a more complex theoretical reading. While the figure of the female murderess has precedents in both Victorian and Early Modern literature, Wilde’s treatment diverges in significant ways. A productive comparison may be drawn with Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), where violence similarly emerges as a response to systemic injustice. In both cases, the woman’s criminal act can be read not as moral degeneration but as a form of ethical resistance – what might be termed a transgressive assertion of agency within conditions that deny legitimate avenues for

action. Hardy's designation of Tess as "a pure woman" underscores the disjunction between legal guilt and moral integrity; Wilde's Beatrice similarly occupies this unstable space, where crime becomes the vehicle for articulating an otherwise unspeakable injustice.

In contrast, Early Modern drama often displaces female agency by representing women as instigators rather than perpetrators of violence. In John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), Vittoria Corombona embodies the archetype of the Italian *femme fatale* – eloquent, transgressive, yet ultimately contained within a moralizing framework that associates female desire with corruption. Wilde's reworking of this tradition is significant. His Duchess does not merely participate in violence; she claims it as an extension of her subjectivity. From a *fin-de-siècle* perspective, her act may be read as an aestheticized gesture, one that transforms violence into a mode of self-expression. At the same time, it reflects a historically specific anxiety about female autonomy, rearticulated through the idiom of Renaissance Italy.

Guido's reaction to Beatrice's act reveals the persistence of normative gender ideology. His considering her act as unwomanly can be understood as an attempt to restore the symbolic order by reasserting the boundaries of acceptable femininity. Yet this response ultimately fails to contain Beatrice's subsequent self-sacrifice and complicates any straightforward reading of her as either emancipated subject or tragic victim.

From a feminist and historicist perspective, then, Beatrice emerges as a liminal figure, situated at the intersection of competing discourses – philanthropic, juridical, economic, and affective. Her trajectory exposes the contradictions inherent in Victorian constructions of femininity, while simultaneously pointing towards alternative forms of subjectivity. In this respect, *The Duchess of Padua* anticipates Wilde's later exploration of identity as performance, where the stability of social roles is increasingly called into question.

11. *Reassessment and Critical Significance*

Despite Wilde's own ambivalence, *The Duchess of Padua* offers far more than the "good lines" he reluctantly acknowledged. Rather than a mere youthful misstep, the play provides a valuable perspective on his early artistic ambitions and intellectual concerns. It reveals a writer actively negotiating questions of genre, morality, and political representation, while experimenting with dramatic form.

Modern scholarship has increasingly recognized the importance of Wilde's early plays. As Joseph Donohue observes, *The Duchess of Padua*, together with *Vera; or, The Nihilists*, reflects Wilde's determination to establish himself within the contemporary theatre (2013). Although these works lack the formal refinement of his later comedies, they display a seriousness of purpose and a willingness to engage with complex ethical and social issues that anticipate his mature writing.

Particularly significant is the way in which the Italian setting facilitates a symbolic engagement with Irish concerns. By displacing issues of land, justice, and resistance onto a foreign stage, Wilde is able to explore the moral complexities of political violence without directly invoking the colonial situation. This strategy allows the play to operate simultaneously within and beyond the conventions of Italianate drama, transforming what might otherwise appear as a derivative exercise into a vehicle for cultural and ideological reflection.

12. *Conclusion*

The Duchess of Padua occupies a paradoxical position within Wilde's oeuvre. Long dismissed as an immature and overly derivative work, it has nevertheless begun to attract renewed critical

attention as a text that illuminates the formative stages of his artistic development. When read through the intersecting frameworks of Italianate drama, Irish cultural politics, and gender studies, the play reveals a complexity that has often been overlooked.

Wilde's engagement with the conventions of revenge tragedy is neither straightforward nor purely imitative. Rather, he appropriates and ultimately subverts the genre, using its formal structures to stage a critique of violence and articulate an alternative ethical vision grounded in restraint, self-awareness, and emotional integrity. At the same time, his use of an Italian setting enables a subtle but sustained reflection on issues central to nineteenth-century Ireland, including dispossession, social injustice, and the legitimacy of resistance.

The figure of the Duchess, in particular, challenges traditional gender roles by assuming agency within a narrative structure that typically excludes female action, while Guido's rejection of revenge signals a broader rethinking of inherited moral codes. Together, these elements point toward what Wilde himself described as the "modern idea under an antique form", demonstrating that the play's apparent archaism is in fact integral to its critical force.

Reconsidered in this light, *The Duchess of Padua* emerges not as a failed precursor to Wilde's later success, but as a significant and intellectually ambitious work in its own right. Its exploration of violence, power, and identity anticipates many of the concerns that would come to define his mature writing, while offering a distinctive contribution to the study of Irish literature and its engagement with European cultural traditions.

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