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**TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF RESEARCH ON JESUIT DRAMA:  
ITALIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF  
THEATRE<sup>1</sup>**

During the international conference *I Gesuiti e i Primordi del Teatro Barocco in Europa* (a title that we could translate as *Jesuits and the Very Beginning of Baroque Theatre in Europe*), many with distinguished European experts in Jesuit theatre met in Rome, at the Pontifical Gregorian University, on 26-29 October 1994. They showed the situation of studies on this subject and suggested to European scholars, and not only to them of course, new areas of activity and new strategies for collaborative international research. Professor Nigel Griffin focused on five areas of activity:

We need all five of these if we are fully to understand the phenomenon of Catholic school theatre. The first is the publication of the documentary evidence [...]. Then, secondly, there is the establishment of a complete *repertorium* of performances [...]. Thirdly, there is the editing, in cheap and accessible formats, of individual plays, together with all the available documentary evidence about their composition and performance [...]. Fourthly, there is the analysis of all this material with a view to establishing patterns of text-distribution [...]. And, fifthly and finally, there is the need for an adequate and up-to-date bibliography of secondary literature on the whole topic, and on allied matters.<sup>2</sup>

In Italy, the conference was the very beginning of a reevaluation of the studies of Jesuit theatre.

Prior to the conference, there were few studies of Italian Jesuit theatre. Most of them were not a result of research on that specific subject, either of hints with which historical or pedagogical studies had provided scholars; others had been written by local historians proud to be fellow citizens of well-known playwrights such as father Stefano Tucci and father Ortensio Scammacca.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, there was a sort of a casualness in research, on the other hand, monographs were often than not

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<sup>1</sup> According to the subject matter of this Conference, my intention is to explore the Italian contribution to research on Jesuit theatre during the seventeenth century. In consequence, I am not going to speak about the studies on Jesuit dramatists who lived during the sixteenth century. First of all, father Stefano Tucci (1540-1597), whose tragedies are now available in a modern edition and translation. For an outline of studies of Italian Jesuit theatre also during the sixteenth century, see SAULINI 2021.

<sup>2</sup> GRIFFIN 1994, 267-268.

<sup>3</sup> See respectively NATOLI 1885; CALOGERO 1919.

apologetic and hagiographic. To put in briefly, there was not yet systematic research on Jesuit theatre in Italy at the beginning of the 1990s.

A second unavoidable contribution to new in-depth studies was in 1999, an essay where Professor Cesare Questa, a Latinist of distinction makes the critical analysis of the tragedies printed at Antwerp in 1634 as *Selectae Patrum Societatis Iesu Tragoediae*. This publication collects an anthology of Latin tragedies from all over Europe. As we know, Seneca has become a model for neo-Latin playwrights in Early Modern Europe since 1314 when the Italian dramatist Albertino Mussato wrote *Ecerinis*, which is considered the first neo-Latin Senecan tragedy.<sup>4</sup> In the essay, professor Questa makes compares the texts of the Senecan tragedies and the texts of the *Selectae Tragoediae*. He confirms and meticulously demonstrates that Jesuit playwrights took Seneca, rather than Greek dramatists, as their main model in structure, meter, and plot. Sometimes, they used Seneca's *corpus* as a repertory of feelings and situations from which they closely copied excerpts adapting them to a new context. The study of Professor Questa provided scholars with new knowledge and with a correct method for analysing Jesuit dramatic texts.

From then on, Italian scholars have been providing us with essays focusing on historical and aesthetic contexts of performances, with chronological repertories, with monographs on Jesuit playwrights, and with modern editions and translations from Latin into Italian of individual Jesuit tragedies.

Italian scholars are mainly concerned with the seventeenth century. For example, two thorough studies put an emphasis respectively on the cultural context of Jesuit theatre in Milan during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and on the repertory staged at the Roman Seminary and the Roman College during the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup>

At the time, the Spanish Crown got Milan under control, so Spanish costume, culture, and aesthetic influenced many facets of Milanese urban life. For example, when king Philip III of Spain died, in 1621, a famous architect designed a sumptuous catafalque for the funeral rite; when Mary Ann of Austria, moving to Madrid to marry king Philip IV of Spain entered Milan, in 1649, the city was triumphantly

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<sup>4</sup> The protagonist of the tragedy is Ezzelino da Romano, the Prince of the Marca Trevigiana; he was a tyrant, he was cruel, like many characters in Senecan tragedies were: see LOCATI 2006.

Although in *Ecerinis* there are figures with a demoniac, horrifying power and a great emotional tension, some scholars, like Marvin T. Herrick, highlighted that Mussato's tragedy « is no mere adaptation of ancient Roman drama [...]. It is deeply religious and, despite its Latinity, an expression of Italian life. »: quoted in STAÜBLE 1980, 47–70, 69.

About a Christian interpretation of *Ecerinis'* ending, a French scholar has recently written: « la tragédie se terminait avec le retour à l'*ordo rerum* grâce à la Providence divine : Dieu est enclin à la douceur, il est lent à châtier, mais il punit inexorablement les criminels »: CHEVALIER 2010, 220.

<sup>5</sup> See respectively ZANLONGHI 2002; FILIPPI 2001.

decorated. The funeral rite for the king of Spain and the visit of Mary Ann were extraordinary events, but we could say that processions, triumphal corteges, and devotional ceremonies were popular theatrical events all year round.

In this panorama, Jesuit theatre was both a private and a public event. It was a private event because plays were performed inside the colleges of the Society of Jesus as part of the holistic education of students because they had a specific moral and religious purpose and were strictly connected with Jesuit treatises on rhetoric. On several political, social, and religious occasions, Jesuit theatre became an element of a larger public event. For example, Jesuit fathers planned decorations for the aforementioned funeral service and visit; during the funeral, a famous Jesuit dramatist, Emanuele Tesauro,<sup>6</sup> illustrated the virtues of king Philip III, who was a great devout of saint Ermenegildo by emblems related to his tragedy *Hermenegildus*, and a mythological play, *Il Teseo* was performed in honour of the bride-to-be of king Philip IV.

Performing a play in a court-theatre in honour of a distinguished guest was a Milanese tradition: *Il Teseo* was performed in the Palazzo Ducale (Duke's Palace), on June 20, 1649. That is a mythological and allegorical play whose plot has a perfect dramaturgy and rhetoric. Famous and distinguished painters and engineers were engaged in the design of the scenery and machinery, so the staging of this tragedy with a happy ending was spectacular and expensive. It is remembered as a pivotal theatrical event in Milan during the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup>

The examination of Milanese urban life confirms that in the seventeenth century, a performance, both religious and secular was not a theatrical event only; in fact, it was related either to an important social occasion or to a ceremony such as the award ceremony in Jesuit colleges, a wedding in a court, the welcoming of a distinguished and guest, and so on.

At the time, the *commedia dell'arte* was a mere theatrical entertainment, not strictly related to a festive occasion. That entertainment was banned from Rome where at the beginning of the seventeenth century, a thriving Jesuit theatrical tradition existed, more than in Milan, due to the performances at the Roman Seminary and at the Roman College. As we know, Jesuit playwrights created and performed a large number of dramas, but only a few of those were selected for printing.

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<sup>6</sup> Emanuele Tesauro (1592–1675) entered the Society of Jesus in 1611 and was appointed to teach rhetoric in 1618. He is well known for *Il cannocchiale aristotelico*, which is considered a fundamental treatise on rhetoric. The Latin tragedy *Hermenegildus* was performed on August 26, 1621 at the Milanese college of Brera. Later, the author translated that tragedy in Italian language and wrote the Italian tragedies *Edipo* and *Ippolito*. All of the three dramas are innovative and strictly connected to rhetoric. They were published in 1661. In 1635 Tesauro left the Society of Jesus: see FRARE 1998.

<sup>7</sup> On the Latin tragedy *Hermenegildus* and the Italian translation of that, *Ermenegildo*, see CARPANI 2008.  
<sup>7</sup> ZANLONGHI 2002, 141–142.

Conversely, numerous playbills were printed by important Roman printers, such as Agostino Mascardi and Bartolomeo Zannetti. Those small books, some of them are made precious by pictures, contain the title, the author, and the *argumentum*, namely, a summary of the play, announcement of the location and date of its performance, dramaturgical and historical notes. The last ones are crucial for knowing what historical and socio-cultural context the Jesuit dramas were performed in.

A volume containing the catalogue, chronologically ordered of the printed playbills which are held by one of the most ancient libraries in Rome the Biblioteca Casanatense, is now available. A careful commentary guides the audience through the reading. The anthology is unavoidable for understanding the theatrical life at the Roman College and at the Roman Seminary: in fact, it looks like the history of Roman Jesuit theatre during the seventeenth century. From the chronological catalogue, we can infer that the moral and exemplar value of dramas do not change, whereas their dramaturgy gradually develops. It goes without saying that Jesuit theatre was not a limited, religious, and scholastic experience (in the past it was often regarded so) but it interfered with many kinds of stimulus from society, culture, and also from the theatre audience.

First, we can infer from the anthology that during the seventeenth century, the subjects of tragedies were historical rather than biblical figures, due to the recently born Stefonian reformation. Stefonio had drawn his subjects from Roman history; during the seventeenth century Jesuit playwrights often drew their subjects from Medieval history. Many times, the protagonist of a history tragedy was a virtuous and faithful prince who, according to the aim of Jesuit theatre, was proposed as a model to be imitated. We have not to forget that a performance basically was a scholastic and formative activity destined for Christian youth.

As we are going to see, the second item concerns directly the dramaturgy and, indirectly, the moral purpose of dramas. During the first decade of the century, numerous plays were written in vernacular and at the turn of the century were performed Italian operas and comedies, as well. On the one hand, Leone Santi writes in the introduction to *Il Gigante*, every viewer can understand an Italian tragedy, so it captures the attention of the spectators more than a Latin one. Consequently, it can move them to imitate moral examples more than a Latin tragedy does.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, music and melodies undoubtedly make a performance more attractive and therefore more engaging for mind and spirit of the audience's members.

The aforementioned father Leone Santi (1582-1652) was a distinguished Jesuit playwright; he was a professor at the Roman College where he also held important

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<sup>8</sup> SANTI 1632, 3.

offices. He wrote in Italian language, performed at the Roman Seminary,<sup>9</sup> and published in 1632 *Il Gigante* a tragedy that is based on the biblical story of David and Goliath. The play-programme was printed in the same year; on the title-page; this play is not classified as a tragedy, but rather as an *attione sacra* (a sacred action). A second version of this sacred action by the title of *Il David* was written and published in 1637. The playbill was published in 1647. Father Santi did not change many things in the text, but it needs to be underlined that he added to the first version some choruses and many lyrical pieces in between the recited parts.<sup>10</sup>

During the time we have referred to Europe, and Italy too, were in a period of great turmoil due to the Thirty Years' War, so it could be inappropriate on February 1632 to celebrate Carnival performing a comical and spectacular play. Father Santi preferred staging a plain drama written in a simple language because of these features made the performance both useful and amusing.<sup>11</sup> We can add that music was largely employed in the tragedies of Santi who is regarded as one of the founders of modern sacred melodrama.<sup>12</sup>

The long list of the playbills confirms that Jesuit playwrights did not like tragicomedies, nevertheless a tragicomic action, by the title of *Ignatius in Monteserrato arma mutans*, was performed at the Roman College in 1622 to celebrate the canonization of the founder of the Society of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

Not only programmes have been published in a modern edition. We have, for example, bilingual editions with commentary of the tragedies *Crispus* and *Flavia* by Bernardino Stefonio (1562–1620),<sup>14</sup> and editions with a commentary of two tragedies written (not in Latin, but in Italian, as we know) by Ortensio Scammacca's (1562/1565?–1648).<sup>15</sup> They have made the works of two great Italian dramatists accessible to modern readers. *Crispus* founded the so-called martyr tragedy. This tragedy was written in 1597, it was performed first at the Roman College, and in 1601 it was printed. A different version of *Crispus*, which had been revised by the author himself was performed in Naples in 1603 and was printed in 1604. Both

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<sup>9</sup> Roman Seminary was founded in 1565. Since 1572, it has been hosting not only Jesuits-to-be, but also secular students of aristocratic families. Every year on the occasion of Carnival, plays were performed there: see TESTA 2002.

<sup>10</sup> FILIPPI 2001, 131–140, 196–200.

<sup>11</sup> SANTI 1632, 3.

<sup>12</sup> SEE SAULINI 1995; PIETROBON 2014.

<sup>13</sup> In 1622 was also canonized the Jesuit Francisco Xavier, called the Apostle of people. Theatre had a crucial importance during the Roman festival in honour of the new saints. In fact, three Latin plays were performed in that occasion at Rome: *Apotheosis sive Consecratio SS. Ignatii et Francisci Saverii*, *Ignatius in Monteserrato arma mutans*, *Pyramalus*, in order to celebrate the virtues and the actions of the two Jesuits: see FILIPPI 2001, 89–112. Cfr., too: SALA-MARINCOLA 1995, 389–440.

<sup>14</sup> See respectively TORINO 2008; STEPHONIUS 2021.

<sup>15</sup> See SCAMMACCA 2013a and 2013b.

Roman version and Neapolitan, definitive version of this drama have been published in a modern edition.<sup>16</sup>

I would like to recall an excellent critical edition of Neapolitan *Crispus* which I mentioned above (see note n. 11); it was edited and translated by Professor Alessio Torino. The introduction, written by the editor himself gives documentary evidence about the differences between Roman and Neapolitan *Crispus* and about the composition of the definitive version. Knowing what the differences are between versions is crucial to understand the degree of transformation a Jesuit text underwent in order to be performed in front of different audiences. As we know, a Jesuit dramatic text could circulate and could be performed even throughout Europe and often a careful study of variants in a tragedy can find out historical and cultural reasons for its transformation.

According to a proposal of the Conference in 1994, to fully understand the phenomenon of Jesuit theatre, we also need documentary evidence such as differences between versions, Jesuit correspondence, eyewitness accounts for performances, marginal notes, and so on. Some testimonies, such as the letters between Bernardino Stefonio and his brother and friend Valentino Mangioni are now available in a modern edition,<sup>17</sup> someone else extant in Archives are waiting for a scholar to revive in a new life. I would like to illustrate what I have just said about documentary evidence by two examples.

Primarily, a miscellaneous codex manuscript that exists in the Historical Archive of Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. One of the dramas it contains is an Italian annotated tragedy by the title of *L'Alessandria. Tragedia di Santa Caterina*, whose author is uncertain. On the front page of the play, a note says that Jesuit father Nicola Orlandini wrote all the marginal notes.<sup>18</sup> Is Orlandini the author of the tragedy, too?

According to the catalogue of the Gregorian Historical Archive, two Italian dramatists Gaspare Licco and Livio Merenda wrote a tragedy entitled *Tragedia di Santa Caterina*.<sup>19</sup> Could one of them be the author of our tragedy? These are open questions, whose responses call for further in-depth research.

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<sup>16</sup> A modern edition of Roman *Crispus* is now available; it consists of the Latin text only. An introduction and an explaining appendix make the readers guided: see STEFONIO 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu: Epp. NN. 80, ff. 10r-13v; now SAULINI 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Nicolò Orlandini (1553–1606) entered the Society of Jesus in 1572. He taught rhetoric in the college of Naples and served as a secretary of the Superior General Claudio Acquaviva. He was a historian and was commissioned by the General Acquaviva to write *Historiae Societatis Iesu prima pars*, 1614. His biographers do not write about him as a dramatist: see FORESTA 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Gaspare Licco (1549–1619) was a Sicilian theologian and dramatist. He was a priest, but he was not a member of the Society of Jesus; as a dramatist he wrote some moral religious-plays. Livio Merenda was a politician who came from a distinguished family. He lived in the Papal State during the seventeenth century. He is not well known as a dramatist.

I have recently looked into the text and I think it is important to indicate the marginal notes on pages. It was not unusual before a performance to read the play in a classroom and write on the text *marginalia*, often consisting of biblical annotations. It is the case, for example, of the most performed tragedy of Stefano Tucci *Christus Iudex*, whose manuscript is contained in a codex extant at the Central National Library in Rome.<sup>20</sup> Differently from several of them, the marginal annotations on *L'Alessandria* are interesting and intriguing from the theatrical point of view: in fact, they tell the actors how enter and leave the stage, how to modulate their voice, and how to gesture. Some notes also describe the costumes which the characters wear in order to remind the audience of atmosphere of Alexandria in Egypt where the tragedy is set. I think we could say those marginal notes are directions of a stage-manager who places emphasis on theatrical elements and is probably interested in the success of the tragedy.<sup>21</sup>

A second testimony is a letter which Bernardino Stefonio wrote on January 18, 1604 to Valentino Mangioni after the staging of *Crispus*, which had been performed at the garden of the Neapolitan college in December, which is a cold month in Naples too.<sup>22</sup>

Stefonio is very pleased with the performance because though it had lasted six hours, it gave the audience great delight. The author writes about the numerous gentlemen, highly trained to attend a theatrical performance, whose attention had been captured by the fine scene-paintings, the magnificent costumes, the graceful dancing movements of choruses. At the end, he writes about the excellent actors who had played their parts better than the Roman ones in 1597.

The Jesuit also describes the scenery which Neapolitan spectators were fascinated by, giving us a relevant piece of information:

Comparve una sciena, signorile invero, fatta di tavole con bel disegno di palazzi, di pitture, di scolture, di colonnati, di balaustri, di strade, di fili et tele, di mura, di guglie, di colonne, di templi, et meniane, a punto come era la Roma antica, in quella parte de la via Sacra che dal Campidoglio venive a fenire a Laterano, attraversata da le Carine, nobilissima strada antica, e da la Trionfale.<sup>23</sup>

(There was a very fancy scenery that was made by painted side boards. They were prettily painted with: buildings, paintings, porticos, banisters, streets, hang out clothes, walls, spires, columns, temples, and balconies. That scene-painting was a faithful representation of an area in ancient Rome. That area was located on the

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<sup>20</sup> Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Vittorio Emanuele: Fondo Gesuitico 223, ff. 1<sup>r</sup>-31<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Archive of Pontifical Gregorian University: APUG 1143, cc. 272-298.

<sup>22</sup> SAULINI 2007, 272-279.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

via Sacra and was included by the Capitol and the Lateran; the ancient and very first road by the name of Carine and the road by the name of Triumphal crossed it.)

In his letter, Stefonio does not underline that the gentlemen appreciated the religious message of the tragedy, rather than, they intended its theatrical features. It is not unreasonable to infer that he did not feel as a religious man interested in the ability of theatre to move the audience's members to Christian faith rather than as a playwright and a stage-manager interested in the success of his tragedy.<sup>24</sup>

The studies of Jesuit theatre are only the Italian contribution to a larger body of European research, in which also many scholars taking part in this Conference are engaged.

Of course, research has confirmed the didactic and religious purpose of Jesuit drama, but it has also demonstrated that drama has to be seen as a significant part in Jesuit culture. On the one hand, theatre is related to oratory and to rhetoric, on the other hand, Jesuit authors need linguistic and literary knowledge since a tragedy itself is a literary work. At the same time, scholars have pointed out that the dramatists of the Society of Jesus were fully aware that their texts were not destined for reading but for performing, in other words that they were engaged in writing theatrical literature. In consequence, a text has often than not an attractive content and a sophisticated dramaturgy; it also suggests special effects for the staging. In order to have spectacular effects, such as angels coming down Heaven, saints sitting on the clouds, and daemons coming to Earth from Hell, scenographers used machinery. Sometimes Jesuit fathers themselves invented the machineries their brothers needed. For example, some elaborate machines were designed by Andrea Pozzo, one of the most distinguished and famous Jesuit painters and architects, who is well known for the *trompe l'œil* decorations of the dome in the church of S. Ignatius of Loyola in Rome.<sup>25</sup>

We can infer from the authoritative example of the aforementioned letter of Stefonio how Jesuit theatre has been relevant to form the audience. Training the audience was highly formative in countries not having an established theatrical tradition. Sometimes Jesuit performances were crucial in countries submitted to a foreign rule: for example, in European countries controlled by the Turks:

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<sup>24</sup> Usually, a Jesuit playwright was also the choragus (stage-manager) of his own dramas. As we know by a testimony of Ianus Nicius Eritraeus, who played the part of Symphorosa in *Sancta Symphorosa* (1591), by Bernardino Stefonio, as a *choragus*, Stefonio was particularly severe with the actors. Quoted in QUESTA 1999, 148–150.

<sup>25</sup> See BÖSEL–SALVIUCCI INSOLERA 2010.



Dans ces conditions, le théâtre scolaire assume une tâche primordiale : pendant deux cents ans, il fut le seul moyen de diffusion de la culture théâtrale et, dans la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, il prépara la naissance du théâtre professionnel de langue hongroise [...]. Le principal promoteur du théâtre scolaire, l'ordre des Jésuites, organisa plusieurs milliers de représentations en Hongrie, représentations qui permirent à des dizaines de milliers de spectateurs de s'initier à l'art du théâtre.<sup>26</sup>

Particularly during the seventeenth century, the so-called Baroque age, Jesuit theatre was part and parcel in the history of Theatre. It was not isolated from the history and culture of the time and it ran parallel to the secular theatre. For example: in performing history tragedies, using machinery, and drawing inspiration from classical and biblical sources. There were differences between Jesuit and secular tragedies, of course, due to a different world view.

For example, secular theatre was a mirror for the doubts of the man. Differently, the hero of a Jesuit tragedy has no doubts about himself and his own destiny. He places his confidence in the promise of God, so he is fully aware to be a son of God whose life on the Earth is a sort of an exile. Consequently, looking at his death, he does not see a catastrophe rather than a rebirth, a large path to our Father in Heaven.<sup>27</sup>

Both Jesuit tragedies and secular ones have usually in common a formative and moral purpose; sometimes, a secular drama has also a religious purpose. For example, during the history tragedy *La Reina di Scotia*, by Federico Della Valle, published in 1628, the queen of Scotland Mary Stuart, who is a prisoner condemned to be beheaded, in keeping her mind on her own death sees herself dying as a queen and as a Christian woman. She has no words of vengeance rather than words of great pity for Scotland, her country that she is going to leave alone. According to a classical rule, Mary Stuart does not die on stage; a major-domo tells the audience the firm attitude which he faced the block with:

Quinci, alzata la fronte inverso il cielo,  
s'è ferma alquanto, e umilmente poscia  
abbracciata la croce, il collo ha steso  
sotto l'orrida falce. (IV, 2421-2424)

(Then, after looking at the sky, she paused for a moment. Then, after closing humbly and strictly at the holy cross, she has put her own neck under the horrible axe.)

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<sup>26</sup> PINTÉR 2015, 35–36.

<sup>27</sup> ANGELINI 1993, 139–146.

It goes without saying that the death of the Catholic Queen of Scotland has a double formative value. In fact, Mary is an example to be imitated both as a queen, who loves her country and her people, and as a Christian woman, who places her confidence in God.<sup>28</sup>

In summary, I would like to recall here, as a basic contribution for research on Jesuit theatre, the project Jesuit Drama, promoted by the Historical Archive of the Pontifical Gregorian University on its Online Gate, into which I am engaged, too. This project was born in late 2019, and it is at the very inception. The first step is a bibliography on Jesuit theatre, the second one is going to be a census of the theatrical manuscripts which are held by the Gregorian Archive and by the Central National Library of Rome. Some manuscripts extant at the Gregorian Archive are expected to be digitized and made available online; at the same time, some manuscripts are expected to be restored. Although the expansion of online resources is crucial to increase studies of Jesuit theatre, and not only of this of course, as everyone here knows, conserving those precious, old papers is no less crucial.

Carrying on that project will not be a plain and simple work, of course, but surely Jesuit Drama will give us intriguing hints for further studies.

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<sup>28</sup> Federico Della Valle (1560?-1628/29?) was one of the most distinguished Italian dramatists during the Baroque age. He is well known for two Biblical tragedies *Ester* and *Judit*, which is the mirror of his own feelings against the politics of the Duke of Savoia, Carlo Emanuele I, who reigned over the country where Della Valle lived. The dramatist began to write *La reina di Scotia* in 1587 (in the same year Mary Stuart was beheaded) and finished its writing in 1591. The tragedy was not performed and was published in 1628 only: see ANGELINI 1993, 146.