

Unveiling *The Duke of Parma*: Introduction to a special issue

[Desvelando *The Duke of Parma*:
Introdução a um número especial]

Enrico Martines*

Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, *The Duke of Parma*, Research project, Editorial practices, Literary archives.

Abstract

This article introduces a special issue devoted to *The Duke of Parma*, Fernando Pessoa's unfinished English-language tragedy, presenting the outcomes of an international and interdisciplinary project and conference held at the University of Parma in 2026. It outlines the project's scope, focused on the transcription, study, and digital encoding of a complex and largely unexplored corpus from Pessoa's literary estate, and describes its methodological framework, combining philology, genetic criticism, and digital scholarly editing, with attention to fragmentariness and textual non-linearity. It then situates the contributions included in the issue, spanning editorial theory, TEI modelling, and literary analysis, each paired with critical responses. Together, these studies examine both the material and interpretative dimensions of the drama, presenting it as a case study for rethinking editorial practices and fostering collaborative approaches to complex literary archives.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, *The Duke of Parma*, Projeto de investigação, Práticas editoriais, Arquivos literários.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta um número especial dedicado a *The Duke of Parma*, a tragédia inacabada em língua inglesa de Fernando Pessoa, reunindo os resultados de um projeto e de uma conferência internacionais e interdisciplinares realizados na University of Parma em 2026. Delineia o âmbito do projeto, centrado na transcrição, estudo e codificação digital de um corpus manuscrito complexo e pouco explorado do espólio pessoano, e descreve o seu enquadramento metodológico, que articula filologia, crítica genética e edição digital, com atenção à fragmentariedade e à não linearidade textual. O texto situa ainda os contributos do volume: da teoria editorial à modelização TEI e à análise literária, cada um acompanhado de respostas críticas. Em conjunto, estes estudos exploram as dimensões material e interpretativa da obra, propondo-a como um caso exemplar para repensar práticas editoriais e fomentar abordagens colaborativas de arquivos literários complexos.

* Università di Parma.



The Duke of Parma is a fragmentary Shakespearean drama in English on which Pessoa worked from 1906-1907, as Jerónimo PIZARRO has suggested (2005: 137, 141-142), until his death in 1935. Opinions are divided as to whether this or *Fausto* is the work to which Pessoa devoted the longest period of time. It is certainly his largest theatrical work in English in terms of quantity. However, what matters most about *The Duke of Parma* is not the records, but the intrinsic significance of this unfinished work.

This extensive literary endeavour comprises around 180 documents divided into two files and forming part of Fernando Pessoa's literary estate, housed in the National Library of Portugal. The existence of this play has been known since 1966. The title *The Duke of Parma* appears (in various forms) in a series of lists that Pessoa had compiled of works he intended to write and publish and, on the basis of these documents, Georg Rudolf LIND mentioned the plays' existence in his "Descobertas no espólio de Fernando Pessoa" (1966: 59).

However, nobody had dared to transcribe and edit *The Duke of Parma*, as it is incomplete and fragmentary (like much of Fernando Pessoa's work), and his documents are difficult to decipher. This is probably also because it is written in English and forms part of his theatrical output — two aspects that have generally been of secondary interest to Fernando Pessoa scholars. Fortunately, this trend seems to have been reversed in recent years, with a proliferation of editions and studies of his theatrical texts in Portuguese, such as *Teatro Estático* (PESSOA, 2017), *Fausto* (PESSOA, 2018; and a digital edition, at faustodigital.com), and *Trilogia dos Gigantes* (digital edition at trilogiadosgigantes.com). There have also been English editions, such as *Marino* (PITTELLA, 2020; 2021). Notably, *Pessoa Plural* dedicated an issue (n.º 14, "A New Act in Pessoa's Drama", 2018) to his theatrical work.

Partly in the wake of this renewed interest in Pessoa's dramatic production, in 2022, I conceived the idea of proposing a project to study *The Duke of Parma*. Given that its title included the name of our city, it seemed only right that the University of Parma should take on a project aimed at revealing this important author's work to the public and the academic community. If Pessoa had conceived of the ancient ducal capital as the setting for a tragedy that preoccupied him for almost thirty years, albeit unfinished, the time had come for Parma to reciprocate and assist in unveiling the fragmentary text in which it played a significant role.

Needless to say, I could never have achieved such a feat alone. I neither had the time nor the necessary expertise. From the outset, I thought it should be a team project involving scholars with complementary skills. Consequently, the project is characterised by its international, collaborative and multidisciplinary nature. This approach that is essential for tackling the text's complexity, as it requires complementary expertise. I have therefore assembled a research team comprising specialists in Pessoa's work, English scholars, philologists and digital publishing experts.

Firstly, this is clearly a Shakespearean tragedy written in English, so expertise in English literature was required. The first person I approached was Diego Saglia,

a distinguished English scholar and my colleague at the University of Parma. Then, I contacted two of the foremost scholars of Fernando Pessoa's work, who have extensive experience in editing his texts. I am referring, of course, to João Dionísio and Jerónimo Pizarro, people who are not only more than qualified for this task, but also colleagues with whom I knew I could work in a spirit of full collaboration. I immediately sought to involve them in the project, and they agreed to participate. The same applies to my Italian colleague, Simone Celani, who specialises in Fernando Pessoa's documentary archive and authorial philology. These three individuals would form a group of editorial consultants with strong philological expertise and solid experience in editing the works of Fernando Pessoa. Another possible contributor who was consulted in the initial phase was Carlos Pittella. In addition to having edited other dramatic works by Pessoa in English (and in Portuguese), he had already started working on a project to edit *The Duke of Parma* before we did, in 2014. He generously shared his initial experience with our fledgling project. Although he did not wish to commit to taking part in this initiative, he remained available as an external collaborator, and his contribution appears in this special issue.

Due to the nature of the project and the text in question, it was decided to include two additional consultants from the University of Parma in the working group: Margherita Centenari, who specialises in digital editions, and Paola Volpini, who specialises in Early Modern history.

Even before submitting the project funding proposal, we had the idea of organising an event to begin discussing all the preliminary issues related to the study of *The Duke of Parma*. Thus, on 17 March 2023, we held the conference "The Duke in Parma", the first event dedicated exclusively to this text by Pessoa¹. The *Luso-Brazilian Review* published a special dossier (<https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/53491>; vol. 61, n.º 2, 2024) containing eight articles derived from papers presented at the 2023 conference, which was the project's first scientific output.

In June 2023, I submitted a project application in response to the University's call for research proposals. The proposal was fully accepted, with funding for the two-year project, called "Fernando Pessoa's *Duke of Parma*: an unpublished Shakespearean tragedy", commencing on 1 March 2024 (dukeofparma.unipr.it).



Fig. 1. Project's logo.

¹ Recordings of this conference are available on a YouTube playlist called "The Duke in Parma" (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLugO3Wkfj4Y-I2dtloDagAfLR9OjERgf8>).

The project's primary objective was, of course, to transcribe the manuscripts in *The Duke of Parma's* documentary dossier. To this end, two working groups were established, one at the University of Lisbon and the other at the University of Los Andes in Bogotá. Both universities offered research grants to recruit two people to devote themselves to deciphering and transcribing the documents: Maria Sousa in Lisbon and Nicolás Barbosa in Bogotá. They were selected and supervised by João Dionísio and Jerónimo Pizarro, respectively. Each group was assigned one of the two folders that make up *The Duke of Parma* dossier. During the final review phase, the two groups exchanged documents. While the transcription was taking place, the Lisbon group studied the structure of the tragedy and examined where the transcribed scenes might have been placed in the author's original plan for the work.

In Parma, a research grant was awarded to support the digital encoding of the transcriptions in XML-TEI format. This was intended for the creation of a digital archive that makes this unpublished and as yet unstudied text available to the academic community. Elena Lombardo was selected to undertake this significant task, which she commenced in January 2025.

The research unit worked remotely, with team members communicating and collaborating via online platforms. All decisions relating to the selection of collaborators, as well as any issues that arose during the course of the work, were discussed at periodic online meetings held by the philological section of the research group to monitor the project's progress.

As our knowledge of Pessoa's tragedy deepened, we observed that there were no genuine references to characters or events associated with the history of Parma, despite the Italian names of the characters and the setting's resemblance to a Renaissance court. In this regard, I would like to point out that, apart from when it appears in the title of the tragedy—which is often placed at the top of the page to identify the work to which the passage belongs—the place name Parma appears only five times in the entire text. There are no other place names linked to Parma or its province. By way of comparison, we note that the name of Rome appears twelve times, however. Consequently, Paola Volpini's services as a consultant on the history of Parma were no longer required for the project. Similarly, Fernando Pessoa's personal library has not yet provided any further valuable insights into the potential sources of the tragedy, aside from the information Teresa FILIPE (2024) presented at the 2023 conference.

The project has also sought to establish fruitful advisory and collaborative relationships with institutions that specialise in the digital preservation of cultural heritage. This is true of the Huygens Instituut, the leading research institute specialising in Dutch history and culture. In September 2024, I travelled to Amsterdam, where I had the honour of being received at the Huygens Instituut by Prof. Mariken Teeuwen, head of the Innovative Digital Editions research group, and Dr. Elli Bleeker, a DHLab member. I presented the project and the challenges involved in creating a digital edition of such a fragmentary text. Following this enjoyable and productive

meeting, a natural collaborative relationship developed, and Elli Bleeker agreed to contribute her expertise to the project by offering her views on the digital encoding work being carried out by Elena Lombardo.

Then, some excellent news related to *The Duke of Parma* arrived at our university. Carlotta Defenu, who had participated in the 2023 conference, had been selected as the recipient of a grant from the European HORIZON-MSCA project. Our university would host the project, whose title is “The Unveiling of Fernando Pessoa’s Literary Legacy: *The Duke of Parma*”. It is dedicated to studying authorial variations in the genesis of *The Duke of Parma* and would be supervised by me. Consequently, Carlotta joined our research group to support the transcription, digital encoding and creation of the online archive.

As the project drew to a close, the final months were naturally devoted to the completion of the transcription and digital encoding work, putting the archive online, preparing the studies that each of us carried out on these materials from different perspectives, and organising an international conference held in Parma to present the digital archive and the results of the research.

The international conference “Unveiling *The Duke of Parma*” was hosted by the University of Parma on 23 and 24 February 2026. During the conference, scholars involved in the project presented their findings on Fernando Pessoa’s unfinished tragedy from a variety of scholarly perspectives. These were then discussed by external specialists, including academics from the universities of Lisbon, Coimbra, Nottingham, the Huygens Instituut in Amsterdam, the Finnish Literature Society and the universities of Padua and Bologna.

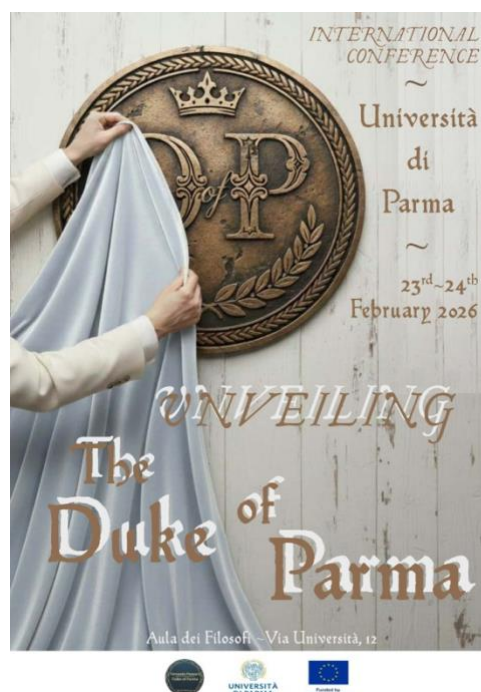


Fig. 2. Conference poster.

However, before turning to these academic discussions, the conference featured a special unveiling with the presentation of the digital archive containing descriptions and encoded transcriptions of all documents related to the tragedy. This archive is accessible via our project's website. I would like to emphasise that this is not a critical edition. No attempt has been made to establish a critical text or select alternative variants because the materials in the *Duke of Parma's* dossier first needed to be transcribed and studied. This archive therefore presents diplomatic—or semi-diplomatic—transcriptions in the order in which the witnesses were catalogued. We intend it to be a tool that makes the texts of this tragedy available to the scholarly community.

The collection of articles featured in this special issue is the result of the development of the communications presented at the conference “Unveiling *The Duke of Parma*” and the reflections offered by the respective discussants. The dossier opens with a discussion of philological issues. These issues relate to the seminal early work on the documentary sources of Fernando Pessoa's tragedy.

Jerónimo Pizarro and Nicolás Barbosa's “The road to ~~madness~~ nowhere: transcription and hypothesis in *The Duke of Parma*” examines the editorial challenges involved in transcribing Fernando Pessoa's unfinished tragedy *The Duke of Parma*, with particular emphasis on the difficulties posed by fragmented manuscripts, illegible handwriting, and variant textual layers. The discussion highlights the interpretative role of the editor in reconstructing the text, addressing issues of attribution, chronology, and coherence within an incomplete and unstable corpus. Carlos Pittella's “This was a dream of Parma: towards a mad method for transcribing Pessoa” re-frames the preceding contribution by situating the transcription issues within a broader reflection on editorial methodology and critical responsibility. He emphasizes the need for transparency in editorial choices and advocates for approaches that preserve textual stratification rather than impose artificial unity, thereby foregrounding the material and processual nature of Pessoa's compositional practice.

João Dionísio and Maria Sousa's “The organisation of the document witnesses of *The Duke of Parma*” addresses the complexities of editing Pessoa's manuscripts from a philological and material perspective, focusing on the stratified nature of the archival documents and the challenges of representing their variability in a critical edition. Particular emphasis is placed on the tension between documentary fidelity and editorial legibility, as well as on the need for methodological frameworks capable of accommodating revision processes, fragmentariness, and the coexistence of multiple textual states. Sakari Katajamäki's commentary, “A bird's eye view of organising: further reflections”, situates the issues raised by Dionísio and Sousa within the broader framework of genetic criticism, emphasizing the importance of understanding manuscripts as dynamic records of the creative process rather than as precursors to a fixed text. He highlights how editorial practices should account for the multiplicity of revisions and writing stages, advocating for models—particularly digital ones—

that can represent textual fluidity and preserve the coexistence of alternative versions without forcing linearization.

Elena Lombardo's "Modelling the Unfinished and Fragmentary: the digital archive of the tragedy *The Duke of Parma*" examines how the complex features of Pessoa's manuscripts—including revisions, variants, and paratextual annotations—can be formally encoded within the XML-TEI framework. Emphasis is placed on modeling as an interpretative act, addressing the challenges of representing layered textual phenomena and authorial interventions in a structured, machine-readable form while preserving the manuscripts' inherent complexity. Elli Bleeker's response, "Ongoing reflections on ongoing work", builds on Lombardo's focus on TEI modeling by critically examining the interpretative consequences of encoding choices, stressing that XML-TEI functions as a structuring framework rather than a neutral medium. She highlights the tensions between hierarchical encoding and the non-linear, overlapping features of manuscript materials, arguing for a more theoretically informed and reflexive approach to modeling that aligns encoding strategies with both the complexity of the sources and the aims of the edition.

Carlotta Defenu's "*The Duke of Parma*, by Fernando Pessoa: genesis and critical examination" offers a comprehensive analysis of the genesis of this play, focusing on the reconstruction of Pessoa's compositional process through the analysis of authorial variants and documentary evidence. Emphasis is placed on the diachronic development of the text across multiple manuscript witnesses, highlighting how shifts in structure, language, and thematic articulation reflect an evolving creative trajectory rather than a linear progression toward a stable work. Manuel Portela's comment, "Intellillegibility in *The Duke of Parma*: is there a text in this text?", expands Defenu's genetic analysis by foregrounding the role of mediality and editorial representation in shaping the understanding of Pessoa's compositional process. Drawing on a digital humanities perspective, he emphasizes how the transition from manuscript to scholarly edition—particularly in digital environments—reconfigures the visibility and interpretation of textual variants, advocating for editorial models that not only document genetic complexity but also simulate and make perceptible the dynamics of writing as a process.

The next couple of topics will shift the focus. They will move from philological and editorial issues to thematic and literary ones.

My contribution is titled "Sexuality and misogyny in Fernando Pessoa: *The Duke of Parma*'s contribution to the topic". These themes are prevalent in this tragedy, which was understandably unavailable to the eminent scholars who have already addressed them in relation to Fernando Pessoa. The text examines how gendered representations and attitudes towards women emerge in various textual contexts. Particular attention is given to the tension between the biographical, cultural and textual dimensions, with a view to highlighting how misogynistic motifs are constructed, refracted and problematised within Pessoa's broader literary and ideological

framework. Mark Sabine's commentary, "'A skirt between us and our thoughts'", deepens Martines's analysis by situating the themes of sexuality and misogyny within the broader critical discourse on gender and embodiment in Pessoa's oeuvre, emphasizing their relevance to the heteronymic construction of subjectivity. He highlights how such representations should be read not merely as biographical or ideological statements, but as complex literary configurations shaped by modernist aesthetics and by the interplay of multiple authorial personae, thereby calling for a more nuanced and context-sensitive interpretative framework.

Diego Saglia's essay, "These wild shows': Shakespearean wit in *The Duke of Parma*" examines Pessoa's English-language writings through the lens of their intertextual engagement with Shakespeare, particularly highlighting the ironic reworking of Shakespearean *wit*. He shows how Pessoa appropriates and transforms this rhetorical mode to negotiate themes of sexuality, desire, and ambiguity, using irony and verbal play to both evoke and subtly subvert early modern literary models within a modernist context. Alessandra Petrina's response, "The heteronymous reader", builds on Saglia's analysis by further interrogating Pessoa's engagement with Shakespearean *wit*, emphasizing its rhetorical sophistication and its implications within an early modern literary framework. She highlights how Pessoa's ironic appropriation of such verbal strategies not only demonstrates a deep intertextual awareness but also complicates their function, suggesting that *wit* operates as a site where literary imitation, cultural translation, and thematic concerns—particularly those related to ambiguity and desire—intersect in nuanced and potentially destabilizing ways.

Finally, this dossier will close with a return to the philological side of things, introducing a theme that looks to the future of the project. Simone Celani's contribution, "A future digital edition model for *The Duke of Parma*" focuses on the methodological challenges of representing a highly fragmented and non-linear textual corpus. He emphasizes the need to rethink traditional editorial categories and workflows, proposing a model that can accommodate discontinuity, dispersed materials, and shifting textual relations, while foregrounding the interpretative dimension of editorial structuring within a digital environment. Paola Italia's response, "Digital archive vs. Digital edition", engages with Celani's proposal by foregrounding the methodological implications of editorial modeling within a broader philological tradition, emphasizing the need to balance innovation with established critical practices. She reflects on how the reconfiguration of the "work" in a digital environment challenges conventional notions of textual unity and authorial intention, while also cautioning against overly abstract models, advocating instead for approaches that remain anchored in the material and historical specificity of the documents and in the interpretative responsibilities of the editor.

I would like to thank all the members of this project sincerely for their skilful work, enthusiasm, and collaborative spirit. Thanks to them, the "crazy" idea I had in 2022 has now become a reality. I would also like to thank the distinguished

scholars who agreed to take an interest in our project, coming here to share their expertise and informed opinions, thereby contributing to the improvement of our work. I believe that the debate, enriched by contributions from external scholars, has confirmed the validity of a pluralistic, collaborative, multidisciplinary approach to the study of complex texts, proposing an innovative paradigm. From this perspective, *The Duke of Parma* proved to be a case study that attracted scholars who had not previously engaged with Pessoa's work.

The conference also emphasised the importance of continuing the work, as what has been achieved thus far is merely the initial, essential step. New challenges lie ahead: these include refining the transcriptions and their visualisation, organising the fragments according to various criteria (archival, chronological, thematic and dramatic), and planning a critical edition that respects the text's incompleteness while offering the public a readable and potentially performable tragedy. Watch this space!

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ENRICO MARTINES é professor associado de Literatura Portuguesa e Brasileira na Universidade de Parma (Itália). Na coleção “Estudos”, da Edição Crítica de Fernando Pessoa (INCM), editou a *Correspondência entre Fernando Pessoa e os Diretores da Presença* (1998), e estudou a história desta revista, assim como as relações entre o movimento da revista *Orpheu* e o chamado “segundo modernismo”. Realizou edições crítico-genéticas e estudos de cariz filológico sobre a poesia de José Régio (integrando a Equipa de Investigação para o Estudo e Edição dos Manuscritos de José Régio) e publicou ensaios sobre autores modernos portugueses (Eça de Queirós, José Cardoso Pires, José Saramago, entre outros) e brasileiros (Antônio Gonçalves Dias). É o autor do livro *I modernismi in Portogallo e in Brasile* (2019) e o coordenador do projeto de investigação “Fernando Pessoa’s *Duke of Parma*: an unpublished Shakespearean tragedy”. <https://dukeofparma.unipr.it/>

ENRICO MARTINES is Associate Professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Literature at the University of Parma (Italy). In the “Estudos” series of the Critical Edition of Fernando Pessoa (INCM), he edited the *Correspondência entre Fernando Pessoa e os Diretores da Presença* (1998) and studied the history of this journal, as well as the relations between the *Orpheu* magazine and the so-called “second modernism.” He has produced critical-genetic editions and philological studies on the poetry of José Régio (as part of the Research Team for the Study and Edition of José Régio’s Manuscripts) and has published essays on modern Portuguese authors (Eça de Queirós, José Cardoso Pires, José Saramago, among others) and Brazilian authors (Antônio Gonçalves Dias). He is the author of the book *I modernismi in Portogallo e in Brasile* (2019) and the coordinator of the research project “Fernando Pessoa’s *Duke of Parma*: an unpublished Shakespearean tragedy”. <https://dukeofparma.unipr.it/>