No one seems to have had any doubts about Philip Massinger’s politics. That politics has consistently been read in terms of commitment to war against Spain, critique of court favorites, and condemnation of unparliamentary taxation and excessive wresting of the prerogative. In many ways, this reading has remained unchallenged since the late nineteenth century, when S. R. Gardiner argued that “the political element in Massinger” consisted of support for the restitution of the Palatinate and a critique of Stuart prerogative politics—policies Gardiner associated with “Massinger’s patron,” the earl of Pembroke. Since Gardiner, political readings of Massinger—by Martin Butler, Jerzy Limon, Margot Heinemann—have all situated him among the “opposition” dramatists, as a parliamentarian and a supporter of the international Protestant cause.¹

With the exception of the doubtful evidence of Pembroke’s patronage, this consensus rests on interpretations of a relatively small number of plays, perhaps most notably The Bondman and Believe As You List.² Those interpretations are themselves susceptible to challenge in ways that might open up a more flexible sense of the political possibilities for the drama in the 1620s and 1630s. But it is also true that the Massinger canon—if such a thing exists—has been established in ways that seem to confirm this version of Massinger’s politics, leaving to the side plays that do not fit the mold. The Renegado, for example, although it has recently earned some attention because of an interest in English contacts with Islam, has remained decidedly at the margins of any “political” reading of Massinger. And yet, The
Renegado has a great deal to tell us about Caroline politics: although it is not strictly a Caroline play, having been first performed in the spring of 1624, it was nevertheless published in 1630 and remained in repertory until the end of the 1630s, facts which give it a Caroline life, if not Caroline origins. More significantly, the play’s politics open importantly onto the Caroline scene: in some ways, it is in the Caroline period that The Renegado discovers its political relevance.

Some time ago, Margot Heinemann argued that there was “no single polarized parliamentary or national opposition with a coherent policy” in the early Stuart period, but “shifting divisions of opinion and questioning among different groups and interests concerning the nature and use of power, in relation to a variety of political, religious, constitutional and social issues.” If this is true, we should not expect a consistent oppositional ideology to operate across all of these spheres and across a twenty-year career, especially the career of a professional playwright writing for the commercial stage. We should expect, at the very least, that the ideology of Massinger’s plays would be closely tied to the moments of their production, and to his ongoing and revisable assessments of each moment. We might also expect that the genres and topics with which Massinger was working would impose their own discursive and ideological requirements, that is, that a Roman tragedy like The Roman Actor and a Turkish tragicomedy like The Renegado would necessarily offer different perspectives on the world and different constructions of the “political.”

This is not to say that there is no coherent politics to Massinger’s plays. But I do want to suggest that “the political element in Massinger” is not so single as some readings have taken it to be, and, further, that the disciplinary divisions that have kept readings of The Renegado separate from readings of Massinger’s politics need to be overcome. In particular, interpretations focused on the scene of domestic, “high” politics must learn from interpretations sensitive to questions of Turkish difference, and vice versa. English discourses about the “Turks” remain at the margins of any discussion of English politics, despite a significant Turkish presence in contemporary political theory, constitutional debate, and religious controversy. At the same time, current discussions of the representation of Islam in the early modern period still tend to abstract the question of English relations with Islam from the total English political scene in ways that diminish both areas of inquiry. I want to bring these two conversations together, to show how The Renegado’s Tunis opens up and complicates the scene of English politics. In this way, we will not only gain a fuller reading of Massinger, but will also be able to achieve a