

Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice

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View of Venice in *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1593), by Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg. From Huntington Library Call Number 180544. By permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

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Venetia, Venetia: The Myth of Venice

Holofernes. I may speak of thee as the traveler
doth of Venice:

Venetia, Venetia

Chi non ti vede, non ti pretia.

—*Love's Labour's Lost* 4.2.97–98

The proverb quoted by Holofernes is printed in a mangled form in both the quarto and folio texts of *Love's Labour's Lost*.¹ We cannot be sure whether the mangling is due to Shakespeare making fun of the Pedant, to the playwright's own errors, or to the vagaries of compositors. In one respect, however, I like to think that Shakespeare was making fun of his character: in a source likely to have been used by the dramatist, there is another part to the proverb: "*Ma chi ti vede, ben gli costa.*" Florio translates "Who sees not Venice cannot esteeme it, / But he that sees it payes well for it."² Holofernes, I suspect, is heaping praises on Venice but ignoring the city's drawbacks.

Just as there were two parts to the proverb, one complimentary to Venice and the other not, similarly one finds always in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries both bright and dark sides to the city's reputation. Here I want to examine both the bright and the dark sides of four components of the Myth of Venice: Venice the Rich, Venice the Wise, Venice the Just, and *Venezia-città-galante*.

These categories are either identical or similar to those of various historians, but most have been adapted for my purposes here. Franco Gaeta's seminal article distinguishes three elements of the Myth: "We can speak of a myth of Venice the mixed state, of Venice the state of liberty, and of Venice the city of pleasure" ("*Venezia-città-galante*").³ A mixed state was thought to be the ideal

form of government, and Venice was regarded as having just the right mixture. The political wisdom of the Venetians was also considered validated by the fact that the Republic had never been conquered ("Venice the state of Liberty"), and an aspect of *La Serenissima's* political wisdom was said to be its extraordinarily impartial and severe justice. Gaeta gives little attention to "*Venezia-città-galante*," and when he does he alludes mainly to the times of Casanova.⁴ But another historian, Oliver Logan, uses Gaeta's term to refer to Cinquecento and Seicento Venice as well as Settecento Venice, though he too downplays the importance of it.⁵ To Shakespeare and Jonson, however, Venice as pleasure capital was one of the most crucial elements of the Myth; hence I give it far more prominence than any of the historians on whom I am relying. For "Venice the Rich" I base my ideas chiefly on the work of Brian Pullan, an economic historian.⁶

I. Venice the Rich

In the time of Shakespeare and Jonson, if one used only one adjective to describe Venice, it was almost always "the Rich." *A Direction for Travailers* is typical: ". . . in Italy of late Roome is dubbed the great, Florence the faire: Naples is called the Noble, and Venice is christened the rich Citie."⁷ The city's publicists boasted that it was "the most copious and rich city under the heavens,"⁸ a "terrestrial paradise."⁹ Outsiders used a lot of hyperbole also, especially tourists: Canon Pietro Casola, for instance, a Milanese with no axe to grind, who passed through on his way to the Holy Land in 1494 writes:

. . . I must make my excuses to the readers of this my itinerary, if it should seem to them that I have overpraised this city of Venice. What I write is not written to win the goodwill of the Venetians, but to set down the truth. And I declare that it is impossible to tell or write fully of the beauty, the magnificence or the wealth of the city of Venice. Something indeed can be told and written to pass the time as I do, but it will be incredible to anyone who has not seen the city.¹⁰

One of the favorite symbols of Venetian wealth and hence favorite subjects for travelers' descriptions was the Treasury of Saint Mark. The following lengthy quotation from Franciscus Schottus

conveys the atmosphere of opulence in his opening speech to his gold and silver Treasury of Celia:

. . . wherein are twelve pretious Carbuncles all compassed about with fine Gold of great value. Among divers other Carbuncles, Crisolits, and other pretious Stones, Two Unicorns Horns of a great value. Many very large Carbuncles [cf. *Carbuncles*], both the eyes of our Saint Mark, and Jasper Stones of a good value. State, by *Domenico Grimani*, a Venetian jeweller-glass heretofore presented by *Uscassano King of Persia*, with many other Carbuncles and Censores of Gold, and Silver Carbuncles (as we call it) with which every Carbuncle is traversed all over with the finest Carbuncles, are many most pretious Carbuncles of inestimable value.

Everyone knew, of course, that Venice's wealth through the centuries had been built thus Salerio accurately imagined the city's wealth of spices and silks (*Merchant of Venice*). Venice's official historians (chosen to describe the city's origins:

. . . there was not any City famous in the world whither the *Venetian Ships* and *Mercantiles* whose hands the most precious Merchandise to the great advantage of the City.

As a modern historian has said of the sixteenth century were traders: "The city's descent from any landed class, but it was for that."¹³

In order to maintain this trade empire to create a military empire as well as to attract visitors. The Arsenal, whose most visible symbol of this might; and as obligatory as descriptions of the city's wealth, being to a favorite tale of tourists, the Arsenal base built and fitted out

conveys the atmosphere of opulence so prominent in Volpone's opening speech to his gold and in his seduction speeches to Celia:

. . . wherein are twelve pretious Crowns, with twelve Brest Plates, all compassed about with fine Gold, and garnished with many Stones of great value. Among divers others, with *Rubies, Emeralds, Topasses, Crisolits*, and other pretious Stones, and Perls of unmatchable bigness; Two Unicorns Horns of a great length, with a third somewhat less. Many very large Carbuncles [cf. Jonson's "Carbuncle able to put out both the eyes of our Saint Mark"], Vessels of Gold, Scollops of Agat, and Jasper Stones of a good bigness. One Huge Ruby given this State, by *Domenico Grimani*, a most worthy Cardinal. An Emerald hower-glass heretofore presented to this most illustrious Seigniory, by *Uscassano* King of *Persia*, with many other pretious things, Vessels, and Censores of Gold, and Silver. There also lies the Mitre or Bonnet (as we call it) with which every new Duke is Crowned. The which is traversed all over with the finest Gold, and pollish't, in whose wreathes, are many most pretious stones; and at the very Top, a Carbuncle of inestimable valew¹¹

Everyone knew, of course, that the main source of Venice's wealth through the centuries had been its trade with the East; thus Salerio accurately imagines Antonio's cargo as consisting of spices and silks (*Merchant* 1.1.33-34). Paolo Paruta, one of Venice's official historians (chosen by the Senate), discusses the city's origins:

. . . there was not any City famous for merchandizing in the *Levant*, whither the *Venetian* Ships and Merchants did not flock. . . . through whose hands the most precious Merchandise of those Countries past, to the great advantage of the City, and of her private Citizens.¹²

As a modern historian has said, the Venetian nobles before the sixteenth century were traders: "They could not trace their descent from any landed class, but felt themselves no less noble for that."¹³

In order to maintain this trading empire the Venetians had to create a military empire as well, and this power also fascinated visitors. The Arsenal, whose managers were "probably . . . the greatest direct employers of labour in Christendom,"¹⁴ was the visible symbol of this might; and descriptions of it were just as obligatory as descriptions of the Treasury of Saint Mark. According to a favorite tale of tourists, this huge arms factory and military base built and fitted out an entire galley in a day while

a delighted Henry III of France watched.¹⁵ Manufactured were such items as ropes, crossbows, and pistols. In a huge warehouse there the Venetians kept vast stores of gunpowder (which blew up in 1569, the noise allegedly heard forty miles away; Jonson's *Sir Politic Would-be* seems to be aware of this event).¹⁶

Venice's economic and military power made it a magnet for foreign traders, and the resulting cosmopolitan atmosphere became part of the city's legend: "One sees in this city an infinite number of men from different parts of the world, with diverse clothing, who come for trade; and truly it is a marvelous thing to see such a variety of persons, dressed in diverse habits."¹⁷ Sansovino notes that the Piazza di San Marco is frequented by "Florentine, Genovese, Milanese, Spanish, Turkish, and other merchants from different nations of the world."¹⁸ Giacomo Franco's engraving of the crowd listening to a mountebank labels its pictures of various nationalities, and includes an Englishman along with a Greek, a Frenchman, a Spaniard, and a Turk.¹⁹ A French traveler comments: ". . . if you are curious to see men from all parts of the world, each dressed in his different mode, go to the Piazza di San Marco or to the Rialto, where you will find all sorts of persons."²⁰ Münster sums up Venice's reputation for both riches and cosmopolitan atmosphere:

In sum, this superlatively magnificent, beautiful, and rich city has become Queen of the Sea, and is inhabited by huge throngs of people of various races, indeed from virtually all nations, come together in that place to trade.²¹

Of the many dark sides of Venetian wealth and power the one that interests me here is the widespread perception in the sixteenth century that this wealth and power was in decline. Some modern historians have disputed this traditional notion,²² but for my purposes the real state of Venetian economic affairs around 1600 is not so important as what Europeans of the time believed to be true. The discovery in 1499 by the Portuguese of the sea route around Africa was widely believed to have cut deeply into Venetian wealth.²³ Other Renaissance observers attributed the alleged decline to the seemingly inexorable advances of the Turk into territories formerly Venetian—the most notable of which, for students of *Othello*, was their conquest of Cyprus in 1571. In 1538 DuBellay wrote a famous sonnet which wittily makes the point about the Turks. He names all the glories of Venice—for example, the Piazza, the Rialto, the Arsenal—and



Return of the Doge from the ceremony Buccintoro, in which the Doge rode, other vessels. From Giacomo Franco, *H* (Venice, c. 1609), Plate 18. By permissi

then, in closing, alludes to the annual ceremony in which the Doge "marries" the Adriatic:

Mais ce que l'on en doit le meilleur estimer
C'est quand ces vieux coquz vont espouser la mer,
Dont ilz sont les maris, et le Turc l'adultere.²⁴
(But that which you must find does best adorn her
Is when those cuckolds old go wed the sea.
Venetians husbands then, the Turk the horner.)

Abbot mentions both the Portuguese *and* the Turks:

The impoverishing of their [i.e. the Venetians] state, hath partly beene by the encroching of the Turke: but especially By the decaying of that trafique which they had to Alexandria in Aegypt for their spices, and other riches of Persia, Arabia, and the East Indies. Since the course of the Portugals to those Easterne countries hath beene by sea, by the backside of Africa.²⁵

II. Venice the Wise

In addition to riches Venice was renowned for political wisdom. As the most successful and long-lived of modern republics, it was much admired by most political thinkers with republican tendencies. Traiano Boccalini, for example, in his witty *I Ragguagli di Parnaso* (1612), has this chapter heading: "Sebastian Veneri, Duke of Venice, after his admittance into Parnassus, desires Apollo that he may have the precedency given him before Hereditary Kings and Monarchs; and obtains a favourable Decree from his Majesty."²⁶ Villamont explains the connection between wisdom and political success: "For the laws of wise and prudent men are the soul of the Republic."²⁷ Another French observer, Pierre d'Avity, follows Contarini in seeing the Venetian constitution as composed of elements of all three of Aristotle's kinds of government: the one (the Doge), the few (the Senate), and the many (the Grand Council). The Venetian state, he sums up, ". . . is composed of all the three kinds . . . out of which they have made one that is perfect."²⁸

Venice's panegyricists tried to show that the Republic's political wisdom included a genuine love of peace. Paruta, for instance, is surprised that Venice did not grow into a greater empire sooner, but says their tardiness ". . . ought not to be imputed to the baseness nor wretchlessness of her Inhabitants but rather

to their Modesty: For the cause to undertake War out of a desire of Liberties. . . ."²⁹ In later ages, however, (Paruta continues) envied Venetian prosperity, the Venetians had to expand their empire. Lest we be too skeptical, however, Paruta's claims that this idea has a core of truth.³⁰

The political wisdom of the Republic is to be validated by the sheer longevity of its propounded the legend that it has been since its supposed founding in the field of politics, like Jean Bodin, political thought has been significant constitutional change in the Republic; but Contarini's view of the Republic expect Paruta to support the offer of proof of its political wisdom, (p. 123). But admirers from other parts of the one of the "Sons of Ben," has a list of the Republic's durability: for instance, she is consistent and conservative in her policies, more inclined to peace than war than those in other parts of Italy, and more so than those in other parts of Italy.

The favorite metaphor for the Republic is as Virgin. Writer after writer idealized the Republic's liberty (freedom from domination) and its chastity. Porcacchi uses it in a number of places we have come across.³² Boccalini imitates the Republic's chastity; but this offer of proof is an unnecessary precaution (p. 8). Paruta is a particular favorite of English writers. Paruta (it ties in with the idea of the Republic's at least metaphorically) *La Serenissima*

. . . the rest of the whole world I have named a Virgin, a name though it is not possible, yet in no place more dearly loved than with us, who have thence come (p. A4)

Howell's prefatory poem in *S.P.* celebrates the Republic's optimism and naiveté (and ex-

Upon the Citty and Signorie of *Venice*.

Could any State on Earth Immortall be,
Venice by Her rare Government is She;
Venice Great *Neptunes* Minion, still a *Mayd*
 Though by the warrlikst Potentats assayd;
 Yet *She* retaines Her *Virgin*-waters pure,
 Nor any Forren mixtures can endure;
 Though, Syren-like on Shore and Sea, Her Face
 Enchants all those whom once She doth embrace;
 Nor is ther any can Her bewty prize
 But he who hath beheld Her with his Eyes:
 These following Leaves display, if well observed,
 How She so long Her *Maydenhead* preservd,
 How for *sound* prudence She still bore the *Bell*;
 Whence may be drawn this high-fetched parallel,
Venus and *Venice* are Great Queens in their degree,
Venus is Queen of *Love*, *Venice* of *Policie*.

(Sig. B4v)

The metaphor of virginity still had imaginative force at the sad end of the Venetian Republic, although Wordsworth's famous sonnet makes a melancholy contrast with Howell's poem:

On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic

Once did She hold the gorgeous east in fee;
 And was the safeguard of the west; the worth
 Of *Venice* did not fall below her birth,
Venice, the eldest Child of Liberty.
 She was a maiden City, bright and free;
 No guile seduced, no force could violate;
 And, when she took unto herself a Mate,
 She must espouse the everlasting Sea.
 And what if she had seen those glories fade,
 Those titles vanish, and that strength decay;
 Yet shall some tribute of regret be paid
 When her long life hath reached its final day:
 Men are we, and must grieve when even the Shade
 Of that which once was great, is passed away.³³

Observers often attributed the longevity of Venice to its political unity. To make the point, Botero (not a Venetian) contrasts Rome and Venice by saying that one speaks of the accomplishments and victories of the Romans as individuals (for example, Julius Caesar did this, Scipio did that): "But in the history of

Venice one sees the reverse; have done this or that, not thern historians agree that Venice Early in this century Molmenti trusted Florence and Venice:

At Florence a few individuals . . . the individual was absorbed . . . the individual initiative to the individual would have found no fitting s so in art. . . . As a rule . . . in lost in the joyous throng.³⁵

McNeill accepts the idea of "the citizens of Venice" and attributes location of their city."³⁶

The late seventeenth-century sums up the connection that w Republic's longevity and its ur they . . . lasted so long under c zens knowing so well how to close. . . . They are People of gr ment."³⁷

The dark side of a reputation tion for craft; and of a reputati in war. Canon Casola, though a nevertheless writes of Venetian they are . . . astute and very su ever has to do business with the well open" (pp. 143-44). Bodin is ous; he thought the latitude allow erate piece of craft: ". . . to mal they give them full scope and lil A reputation for being peace in a macho world. Fynes Morys cowardly vis-à-vis the Turks: "Ar ice are trayned upp in pleasur needs abase and effeminate their the Venetians were "better citize

Unity, too, has a dark side. Th was suppression of individual fr uation. Étienne La Boetie inaccu

Venice one sees the reverse; . . . one says that the Venetians have done this or that, not this or that individual."³⁴ Some modern historians agree that Venetian society was relatively unified. Early in this century Molmenti, perhaps drawing on Botero, contrasted Florence and Venice:

At Florence a few individuals . . . dominate history. . . . At Venice . . . the individual was absorbed in the State, which refused independent initiative to the individual. . . . The ambitions of the Medici would have found no fitting soil in Venice. . . . As in public life, so in art. . . . As a rule . . . in Venetian pictures the individual is lost in the joyous throng.³⁵

McNeill accepts the idea of "the cohesion achieved among the citizens of Venice" and attributes it in part to "the isolated, insular location of their city."³⁶

The late seventeenth-century writer Amelot de la Houssaye sums up the connection that was thought to exist between the Republic's longevity and its unity: ". . . the great reason why they . . . lasted so long under one Government, was their Citizens knowing so well how to obey. They are very secret and close. . . . They are People of great Order, Providence and Judgment."³⁷

The dark side of a reputation for political wisdom is a reputation for craft; and of a reputation for peacefulness, cowardice in war. Canon Casola, though a tremendous admirer of Venice, nevertheless writes of Venetian gentlemen: "For the most part they are . . . astute and very subtle in their dealings, and whoever has to do business with them must keep his eyes and ears well open" (pp. 143-44). Bodin is much more cynical and censorious; he thought the latitude allowed the people of Venice a deliberate piece of craft: ". . . to make them more mild and pliable, they give them full scope and libertie to all sorts of pleasures."³⁸

A reputation for being peace-loving is always double-edged in a macho world. Fynes Moryson believes the Venetians to be cowardly vis-à-vis the Turks: "And indeed the Gentlemen of Venice are trayned upp in pleasure and wantonnes, which must needs abase and effeminate their myndes."³⁹ Bodin remarked that the Venetians were "better citizens than warriors."⁴⁰

Unity, too, has a dark side. The price of it, to some observers, was suppression of individual freedom—a true "Big Brother" situation. Etienne La Boetie inaccurately takes the Venetians to task

for surrendering their primitive liberties to the Doge; while Francesco Vettori, a friend of Machiavelli, more accurately blames the patriciate: "Is it not tyranny when three thousand patricians hold sway over one hundred thousand persons. . . ?"⁴¹ An aspect of Venetian unity which drew much unfavorable comment from foreigners was the Republic's refusal to allow citizens much contact with outsiders. Montaigne, who visited the city in 1580-1581, said that if a gentleman spoke twice to him, the Signiory would hold that person suspect.⁴² The same objection was raised a century later by Maximilien Misson and Saint Didier,⁴³ the latter noting that Venetian nobles were forbidden any dealings even with servants in a foreigner's household. Boccalini attributed much of the Republic's success to the ability of noble Venetians to keep state secrets (p. 41-42), but the price of their power was a certain amount of suspicion in the air at all times.

III. Venice the Just

Part of political wisdom is, of course, justice. But Venice had such a special reputation for justice; and Shakespeare and Jonson made such important uses of the reputation of Venetian justice, that this subject deserves separate and extended examination.

Venetian justice was thought to be different, partly because "they use not as in other places the civil law [in the sense of Roman law], but live and are governed by their own laws and peculiar course of justice."⁴⁴ Lewis Lewkenor claims, ". . . there was at one instant threescore sundry Ambassadors from severall princes and commonwealths in *Venice*, desiring to have such controversies as were among them ended and decided by the Senate, such was then the fame of the uncorrupted justice of the Fathers" (Sig. Ff2^v). Giustiniani traces the origin of the high esteem in which justice was held to a sort of Golden Age of the forefathers:

. . . there was among them the deepest concord and a great love. All things were had in common, the private held as public, the public as private. From this it necessarily followed that justice was most highly honored.⁴⁵

The greatest fame Venetian justice enjoyed was for its supposed impartiality, even toward the lower classes and outsiders—which is, of course, what Shylock was counting on. Bodin, who did not have a high opinion of the Venetian constitution, nevertheless praises the impartiality of the judiciary system highly

(McRae, ed., p. 785). Boccalini illustrates well this aspect of

. . . some Plebeians in *Venice*, to the Sea-side to sollace the which they had carried along some Noble Venetians, as the swords, slew one of the other which fault, being sent for by they saw all the Judges in the they hoped so much in the exact Justice of the Tribunals for their appearance, and go to Pr opinion; for the Judges finding how they had been molested as innocent, set at liberty, to the tian Justice. (p. 13)

The Venetian diarist Sanudo no in favor of a Florentine against

In addition to its vaunted praised frequently for its severed in laymen by the loss of the Scottish traveler Lithgow wery.⁴⁸ Moryson saw two young cut off at one of the sites of out at the site of their singing their heads chopped off by a so

The highly favorable image reached England. Lewkenor h pure and uncorrupted: their p executed" (Sig. A2^v). The same t ity) were still being made by Ve century. Molmenti, with astoni rian, asserts that "legal proces spotless honesty and perfect e later, "But if Venetian justice wa be denied that it was remarkab

Of course there were those i centuries who were not impres ing sharply with Boccalini's anecdote about a fray that occurred A foreign count and a Venetian with the same woman, and a s

(McRae, ed., p. 785). Boccalini tells a colorful anecdote which illustrates well this aspect of the Myth:

... some Plebeians in *Venice*, being gon according to their custom, to the Sea-side to sollace themselves with some young Courtisans which they had carried along with them, they were so beaten by some Noble Venetians, as the former betaking themselves unto their swords, slew one of the others, and handled the rest but ill. For which fault, being sent for by the Judges, those Plebeians, although they saw all the Judges in the power of the offended Nobility, yet they hoped so much in the uprightness of the Senat, and in the exact Justice of the Tribunals for offences, as they stuck not to make their appearance, and go to Prison: Nor were they deceived in their opinion; for the Judges finding by the defence which they made, how they had been molested by those Noble Venetians, they were as innocent, set at liberty, to the eternal glory of the uncorrupt Venetian Justice. (p. 13)

The Venetian diarist Sanudo noted down his pride in a judgment in favor of a Florentine against a Venetian patrician.⁴⁶

In addition to its vaunted impartiality, Venetian justice was praised frequently for its severity. Swearing was sometimes punished in laymen by the loss of a hand, tongue, or eye.⁴⁷ In 1609 the Scottish traveler Lithgow watched a friar burnt alive for lechery.⁴⁸ Moryson saw two young sons of senators have their hands cut off at one of the sites of their mischief, their tongues cut out at the site of their singing of blasphemous songs, and finally their heads chopped off by a sort of guillotine in the Piazza.⁴⁹

The highly favorable image of Venetian justice had definitely reached England. Lewkenor hyperbolizes, "... their justice is pure and uncorrupted: their penall Lawes most unpardonably executed" (Sig. A2^v). The same two points (impartiality and severity) were still being made by Venetian partisans early in our own century. Molmenti, with astonishing naiveté for a modern historian, asserts that "legal procedure was at all times marked by spotless honesty and perfect equanimity," adding a few pages later, "But if Venetian justice was purer than elsewhere, it cannot be denied that it was remarkably severe."⁵⁰

Of course there were those in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who were not impressed by Venetian justice. Contrasting sharply with Boccalini's anecdote is Sir Thomas Hoby's anecdote about a fray that occurred when he was in Venice in 1549. A foreign count and a Venetian magnifico both wanted to dance with the same woman, and a shoving match ensued. The Vene-

tian tried to stab the foreigner, but the latter was wearing a coat of mail. The foreigner then drew his rapier, and was felled by the sword of one of the Venetian's retainers. Hoby adds, "There was no justice had against this gentlman [*sic*], but after he had a while absented himself from the citie the matter was forgotten" (p. 14). William Thomas notes that ". . . corruption (by the advocates' means) is so crept in amongst the judges that poor men many times can want no delays in the process of their matters" (pp. 77-78). Amelot de la Houssaye attributes the severity of Venetian justice to ulterior motives:

They have a great vanity to be thought good Justiciaries. . . . But there are two things generally complained of in their Judicature; One is, that few of them are versed in their Laws. . . . The other, that upon any Offence they condemn People to the Galleys, as well for trifles as for the greatest Crimes, according to their interest, that is, to their Necessity for Rowers: and this is the reason why so few People are Executed, neither are they more scrupulous for Banishment, and Confiscation of Estates. For there needs not much reason of *State* against those who are rich. . . . (p. 281)

The severity of Venetian justice offends modern readers. The loss of hands, tongues, or eyes for swearing seems to us especially barbaric. Torture, too, was common. The Officers of Night (see *Othello* 1.1.182) were said by Canon Casola to employ in their hearings "the torment, called in our tongue the *Curlo*," or, in English, the rack (p. 126). Hoby mentions that a nobleman guilty of premeditated murder was tortured but not put to death: "But for all they putt him to the torment of the cord, they coule never make him confesse. . . . And the law is, except a man confesse his tresspace when he is putt to this torment, he shall never suffre deathe for yt" (p. 16).

IV. *Venezia-città-galante*

Despite the dark sides of Venice the Rich, Venice the Wise, and Venice the Just, the European image of these components of the Myth was, generally speaking, more often favorable than unfavorable. The same cannot be said of that aspect of Venice's reputation which historians have dubbed *Venezia-città-galante*; here, the image was dark—or perhaps one should say lurid, with the darkness visible.

Nevertheless, there certainly the pleasure capital of Europe, a legitimate ones. Tourists flocked ties of *La Serenissima*. Lewkenc a graver humor" are struck by the gravities of their prince, the unviolableness of their lawes, th their moderation and equities youthfuller sort, would extoll wardes straungers, the delicac beauty, pomp, and daintines of t superfluities of all pleasure an Casola expresses an idea which in Venice, regardless of century: thing, I saw only a part, and see all I could" (p. 129).

Even in the time of Shakespeare major source of revenue for the at pleasing foreign visitors. In English traveler, Sir Richard To

Ther I was well at ese, ffor the have but I had it shortly. At Ven to except oon, the good man o my face that I was an englyssh englyssh, thanne I was Jo[yo]us a man ffrom the tyme I Departed to Venys . . .⁵¹

In the interests of balance I sho were keen about Venice, and am were two famous names: Mich Sidney.⁵² Late in the seventeenth up, from a tourist's viewpoint, t

Having thus seen all *Venice*, over stay there, I was most willing t *Venice*, what *Socrates* sayd of *Athe uxor*; a fine towne for a fortnigh this, by reason of some *stinking water*; and the *moist ayre of the Se of earth* even to bury their deac

Nevertheless, there certainly was a bright side. Venice was the pleasure capital of Europe, and many of these pleasures were legitimate ones. Tourists flocked in, then as now, to see the beauties of *La Serenissima*. Lewkenor notes that while travelers "of a graver humor" are struck by the "greatnes of their Empire, the gravitie of their prince, the majesty of their Senate, the unviolableness of their lawes, their zeale in religion, and lastly their moderation and equitie," by contrast "some of the youthfuller sort, would extoll to the skies their humanitie towards straungers, the delicacie of their entertainments, the beauty, pomp, and daintines of their women, & finally the infinite superfluities of all pleasure and delightes" (Sig. A2). Canon Casola expresses an idea which has occurred to most tourists in Venice, regardless of century: "Though I wished to see everything, I saw only a part, and even that by forcing myself to see all I could" (p. 129).

Even in the time of Shakespeare and Jonson tourism was a major source of revenue for the Venetians, and they worked hard at pleasing foreign visitors. In the early sixteenth century, an English traveler, Sir Richard Torkington, comments gratefully:

Ther I was well at ese, ffor ther was no thyng that I Desyred to have but I had it shortly. At Venyse, at the fyrst howse that I cam to except oon, the good man of the howse seyde he knew me by my face that I was an englysshman. And he spake to me good englyssh, thanne I was Jo[yo]lus and glade, ffor I saw never englyssh man ffrom the tyme I Departed owt of Parys to the tyme I cam to Venys . . .⁵¹

In the interests of balance I should point out that not all tourists were keen about Venice, and among those less than enthusiastic were two famous names: Michel de Montaigne and Sir Philip Sidney.⁵² Late in the seventeenth century, Richard Lassels sums up, from a tourist's viewpoint, the defects of Venice:

Having thus seen all *Venice*, over and over againe, in amonths [*sic*] stay there, I was most willing to leave it; having found it true of *Venice*, what *Socrates* sayde of *Athens*, that it was *melior meretrix, quam uxor*; a fine towne for a fortnight, but not to dwell in alwayes; and this, by reason of some *stinking channels*; *bad cellers* for wine; *worse water*; and the *moist ayre of the Sea* not the most wholesome; *scarcity of earth* even to bury their dead in; and *little fewel* for fireing. So

that findeing the four elements wanting here in their purity, I was willing to leave. . . .⁵³

But for every dissatisfied or half-satisfied tourist, there must have been a hundred who were enthusiastic.

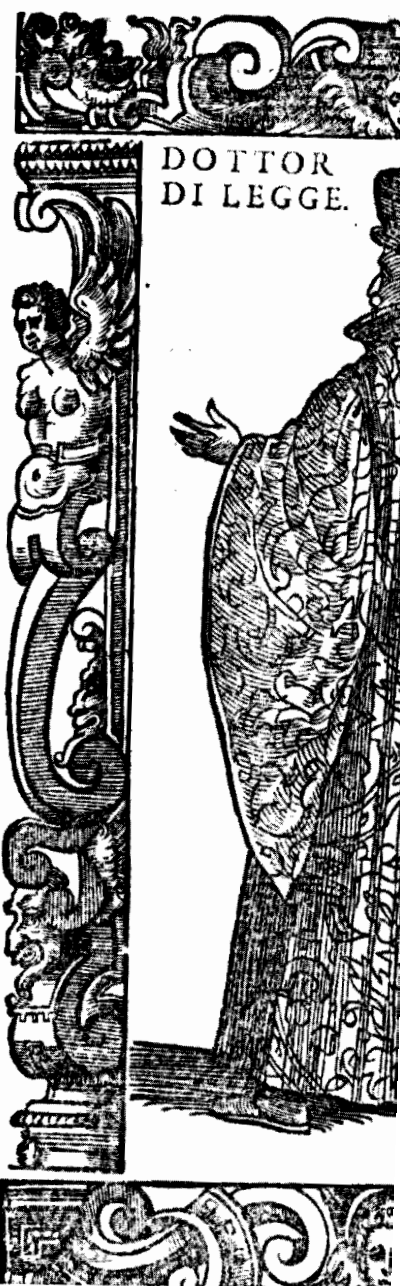
What, then, were some of the legitimate pleasures that drew all these tourists to Venice? Besides admiring the general beauty and magnificence of the city's architecture, art, bridges, and canals, many were drawn to Venice by the civic pageantry and holiday revelry—not only annual events but also special occasions. Molmenti asserts: "In Venice of the sixteenth century luxury and splendour surpassed all bounds; never before at any time nor in any city were religious ceremonies, victories, . . . visits of foreigners . . . celebrated with greater pomp and magnificence."⁵⁴ The historian Edward Muir has recently devoted a whole book to civic ritual and its functions in Venetian society.⁵⁵

Among the annual events the most spectacular processions and celebrations were at Carnival, Ascension, and Corpus Christi. Carnival at Venice predictably featured masquerading, dancing, and attending comedies. Sansovino comments:

And in the Fontico de i Tedeschi it was customary in the three days before Carnival to make a public feast with open doors, where all the masked figures of that season came together in a continual dance, which lasted all three aforesaid days. Also held were the loveliest and most sumptuous masquerades, with various liveries for the horses, with coursing of the bulls, with tilting, and with diverse music.⁵⁶

The masking was probably the most important single feature. Molmenti notes the connection between this custom and the *commedia dell'arte*: "Carnival gradually came to be more and more thronged with masqueraders, the principal figures being the magnifico or pantaloon as he afterwards became, the *Zanni*, and the *Mattaccino*."⁵⁷

Saint Didier's comments, though late, are of interest. He notes, "The *Carnaval of Venice* is so Famous . . . that those of other Countries who are desirous to see *Venice*, wait this Opportunity." He attributes the popularity to ". . . the Custom of assuming any sort of Disguise, the great Liberty which all Masques every where enjoy." His very metaphors show the connection between Carnival and theater: "The Place of Saint *Mark* is the great Theater, upon which is to be seen the chief Appearance of the *Carnaval*" (Part 3, pp. 55–56).



Portia's disguise? This costume was worn in Venice, throughout Lombardy ("Dottor la Lombardia"). We can easily imagine her in Act 4, *The Merchant of Venice*. From *et moderni* (Venice, 1590), Sig. V5 verso

Another festival popular with foreigners was Ascension Day, shortened by the Venetians to "Sensa." Molmenti, writing about the period around 1600, claims that at this holiday over 100,000 people poured into Venice. When one recalls that the total population along about this time was probably 150,000–200,000, one can imagine the impact of the holiday on the city's consciousness, and on the consciousness of the visitors as well.

The chief feature of the Corpus Christi Day celebration was a solemn and magnificent procession through the Piazza di San Marco. Of particular interest to Jonson scholars is the following note, which relates to Celia's watching of the disguised Volpone performing in his "obscure nook of the piazza" (2.2. 34–39, 199 s.d.). Sansovino says, "And the women, placing themselves all around the piazza at the upper windows, awaited the rich pomp which was to come."⁵⁸ Richard Guylforde wrote in 1506 of the Corpus Christi procession that the ". . . forme and manner thereof excedyd all other that ever I sawe so moche that I can not wryte it" (p. 9).

A good example of the vividness with which the annual events of Venetian holiday celebration impressed visitors is Saint Didier's description of the Procession of the Holy sacrament: "Nothing can be more Glorious than Venice upon this Night, which is illuminated with Millions of Flambeaux, the Place of St. Mark being then one of the finest Sights imaginable. . ." (Part 1, p. 32).

In addition to annual events, the Venetians were famous all over Europe for their celebrations in honor of visits by foreign notables. By far the most well-known of these was what Volpone calls "the entertainment of the great Valois" (3.7.161). Henry III of France visited Venice in 1574, and Muir has found no fewer than fourteen extant pamphlets devoted only to this subject.⁵⁹ Details can wait until Chapter Five; here it is sufficient to note the importance of such celebrations in establishing the bright side of the European image of *Venezia-città-galante*.

In all the fine arts, too, Venice could offer much. The glitter of Venetian painting in the period is too well known to need description, but we should note that the music was outstanding also. Venetian madrigals, for instance, were regarded as particularly singable and hence suitable for domestic performance. Therefore many English composers in this form followed the Venetian school rather than Monteverdi.⁶⁰

* * *

Every large European nation of Shakespeare was reputed to be known though fictional Danish "They clip us drunkards." With to attribute to the Venetians was Howell put it, "She is taxd all of liberty She gives to carnall ple She hath under the navill" (p. 19 writers who praise the splendors also condemn *La Serenissima* for sexual kind. Saint Didier, for inst

Many of those who know Rome these two Cities is the most Libe with Courtisans. For my one part to what is Practised at Venice. . . .

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The artistic temperament of the It ment and grace over vice itself; th judgment; the search for pleasure living surely and steadily, day by d and the vigour of the Arm.⁶¹

When Othello bitterly and sar "I took you for that cunning whor would have struck a chord of re educated person in Western Euro indeed notorious; first of all, by estimate of twenty thousand in Molmenti, but the early sixteenth- a patriotic Venetian, puts the nur vant Fox sets it at eight thousand that somewhere between five and lation was composed of prostitutes portion, by almost anyone's stanc The courtesans were also famo they practiced their trade. Vecel picture of the "meretrici de' luo and doorways. After describing bare breasts, he adds:

Every large European nation or linguistic group in the age of Shakespeare was reputed to have a characteristic vice; a well-known though fictional Danish prince, for instance, notes that "They clip us drunkards." Without any doubt the favorite vice to attribute to the Venetians was sexual licentiousness. As James Howell put it, "She is taxd all the World over for the latitud of liberty She gives to carnall pleasure, and the large conscience She hath under the navill" (p. 199 [Sig. Ee]). Many of the same writers who praise the splendors of Venice's legitimate pleasures also condemn *La Serenissima* for its illegitimate pleasures of a sexual kind. Saint Didier, for instance, asserts:

Many of those who know *Rome* and *Venice*, are at a loss which of these two Cities is the most Libertine, and most plentifully serv'd with Courtisans. For my one part I am certain nothing can be equal to what is Practised at *Venice*. . . (Part 3, p. 47)

Molmenti goes so far as to blame moral decadence in general and courtesans in particular for the eventual fall of the Republic:

The artistic temperament of the Italians threw a glamour of refinement and grace over vice itself; the aesthetic supplanted the moral judgment; the search for pleasure passed all limits, and voluptuous living surely and steadily, day by day, sapped the energy of the brain and the vigour of the Arm.⁶¹

When Othello bitterly and sarcastically says to Desdemona, "I took you for that cunning whore of Venice" (4.2.89), his words would have struck a chord of recognition for practically every educated person in Western Europe. Venetian courtesans were indeed notorious; first of all, by their sheer number. Coryat's estimate of twenty thousand in 1608 is called "fantastic" by Molmenti, but the early sixteenth-century diarist Sanudo, himself a patriotic Venetian, puts the number at 11,654. Cavendish's servant Fox sets it at eight thousand in 1589.⁶² Thus it seems likely that somewhere between five and ten per cent of the entire population was composed of prostitutes—a somewhat astounding proportion, by almost anyone's standards.

The courtesans were also famous for the openness with which they practiced their trade. Vecellio paints an interesting word picture of the "meretrici de' luoghi publici" at their windows and doorways. After describing their apparel, which featured bare breasts, he adds:

But one cannot easily describe how they adorn their heads, how they come to the windows, frequenting even more the doorways and the street, to draw into the net the suckers that pass by. There they remain, singing amorous canzonets, but with little grace and conforming to their vile condition, making themselves heard by almost everybody by means of a raucous voice.⁶³

That prostitutes were so numerous and their solicitations so open was possible only because the Venetian government tolerated—indeed, regulated—the trade. Courtesans were under the jurisdiction of the “Signiory of the Sanità,” an agency named by Volpone (in a different context—2.2.144–45) that was a kind of Ministry of Health (*Delle cose notabili* 1587, Sig.17).

Coryat, with a religious fervor somewhat at odds with his minute and basically complimentary account of his meeting with the famous courtesan Margareta Aemiliana, denounces the official toleration of the trade: “A most ungodly thing without doubt that there should be a toleration of such licentious wantons in so glorious, so potent, so renowned a city” (1.402).

Several writers speculate about the reasons for this official toleration. Besides the idea already mentioned that it was a deliberate piece of statecraft designed to keep the lower classes in line, another idea is that the *Clarissimi* themselves enjoyed mistresses and were perhaps unwilling to legislate their own inconvenience. The Venetians claimed that they imported courtesans to preserve the honesty of local women. Saint Didier remarks sarcastically, “. . . the Republic seem’d to believe that the Sea-Air render’d this Disorder [i.e. lust] habitual and without remedy. . . .” The author of *Delle cose notabili* does indeed make the claim that Saint Didier is ridiculing.⁶⁴

The Venetians were also accused of tolerating such huge numbers of whores because the whores were an important part of the famed “liberty” of Venice. Saint Didier comments, “This Famous Liberty draws Strangers hither in Multitudes, where the Pleasure and Diversions of the Place as sure empty their Pockets” (p. 46).

“This Famous Liberty” was a controversial subject. The Venetians and their admirers began with the definition of liberty as the freedom from foreign domination which Venice had for so long enjoyed and extended that definition in a questionable manner by asserting that in Venice an individual had “liberty,” that is, freedom from arbitrary oppression.⁶⁵ I discuss the whole no-

tion of Venetian liberty in connection with the city’s reputation as a *città-galante* because of its late seventeenth-century ones, arguing that it was really a euphemism for sexual license. Saint Didier who has the most penetrating analysis of this liberty “which is at Venice so much valued even from the meanest of the People” says that it consists mainly in indulging in pleasures that are to one’s betters: “. . . it seems to me that this is properly a Political Libertinism”

The Liberty of Venice makes every thing that is against the Life is, or Religion one Professeth, or Attempt any thing against the Liberty of the People, be sure to Live unmolested, for no man shall be able to oppose their Conduct, or to oppose the Discretion of the State. (3, pp. 44–45)

A vicious circle developed: the City’s reputation for much of a conscience from the government’s looking into anyone else’s sexual habits attracted foreigners; and the more those foreigners came (doubtless) Venice really did become more of a city for foreigners were attracted to Venice because of this aspect of the city’s reputation continued.

Unfortunately for Venice’s respectability, the toleration for sexual license rubbed off on the rest of Italy. The Milanese writer, Ortensio Landino, says that the women “. . . are beautiful in form, but have the gestures and mores of whores.” This was especially when they adopted—doubtless with the approval of their husbands, be it noted—a peculiar practice of exposing or nearly bare, breasts in public, one of the customs Moryson says that the breasts are painted red and white makeup:

The women of Venice weare gownes, and their faces are bare, and they are closed before we see them, so that we may see the linnen which they lap about their faces, seeme fat, the Italians most loving fat faces, and their necks and breasts, and likewise their hands, are covered with linnen, and all made white by a

tion of Venetian liberty in connection with the dark side of its reputation as a *città-galante* because most writers, particularly the late seventeenth-century ones, argue that this famous liberty was really a euphemism for sexual licentiousness. As usual it is Saint Didier who has the most penetrating analysis. He asserts that this liberty "which is at *Venice* so much in every one's Mouth, even from the meanest of the People to the first of the Senators" consists mainly in indulging in pleasures and being disrespectful to one's betters: ". . . it seems to me that this Liberty of *Venice* is properly a Political Libertinism" (Part 3, pp. 42-43). He adds:

The Liberty of *Venice* makes every thing Authentick, for whatsoever the Life is, or Religion one Professes, provided, you do not Talk, or Attempt any thing against the State, or the Nobility, one may be sure to Live unmolested, for no Body will go about to Censure their Conduct, or to oppose the Disorders of their Neighbors. (Part 3, pp. 44-45)

A vicious circle developed: the City's reputation for not having much of a conscience from the girdle downward and for not looking into anyone else's sexual habits attracted rich, licentious foreigners; and the more those foreigners flocked in, the more (doubtless) Venice really did become a city of sexual license. Such foreigners were attracted to Venice as early as 1565, and this aspect of the city's reputation continued to grow.⁶⁶

Unfortunately for Venice's respectable women, the city's reputation for sexual license rubbed off, to some extent, on them. The Milanese writer, Ortensio Landi (or Lando), says Venetian women ". . . are beautiful in form, but to speak plainly they have the gestures and mores of whores."⁶⁷ They did not help matters when they adopted—doubtless with the tacit consent of their husbands, be it noted—a peculiar public fashion in clothing: bare, or nearly bare, breasts in public, on which cosmetics were worn. Moryson says that the breasts are partially concealed by lace and white makeup:

The women of Venice weare gownes, leaving all the necke and brest bare, and they are closed before with a lace, so open, as a man may see the linnen which they lap about their bodies, to make them seeme fat, the Italians most loving fat women. They shew their naked necks and breasts, and likewise their dugges, bound up and swelling with linnen, and all made white by art. (1907 ed., iv.220)

Henri Estienne speaks (in 1578) of this fashion as astonishing and unfamiliar (at least to Frenchmen). Even his word for it, "espoitrinement," is clearly a novelty.⁶⁸ In the 1590s Villamont says specifically that the fashion is not to be found in Venice's neighboring cities: "But the Romans, Milanese, Neapolitans, Florentines, Ferrarese, and other dames of Italy are much more modest in this regard, for . . . they do not uncover their breasts."⁶⁹ Coryat objects to the fashion on moral grounds: "For I beleeve unto many that have prurientem libidem, they would minister a great incentive and fomentation of luxurious desires" (1.399-400).

Exposing the breasts was only the most spectacular of many colorful fashions adopted by Venetian women. Among these were the platform shoes called chopins (which Hamlet mentions in talking to the players), and the customs of bleaching the hair and wearing heavy cosmetics and splendid clothing. Moryson notes: "For this attire the women of Venice are proverbially said to be, Grande de legni, Grosse di straci, rosse di bettito, bianche di calcina: that is tall with wood, fat with ragges, red with painting, and white with chalke." (iv. 220)

I would not argue that Venice's function as a fashion center for Europe necessarily had anything to do with its reputation for sexual immorality any more that Paris's similar reputation (say, in the 1920s) contributed to that city's fame as a fleshpot. But the two kinds of reputations do seem to go together, so perhaps there *is* a connection at some obscure level.

Whether as a result of their tastes in fashions or because of guilt by association attributable to the fame of Venetian courtesans, Venetian wives had some reputation (Iago exaggerates it) for straying from their husbands when they could. But such straying, according to writer after writer, was almost impossible because of the extreme jealousy of Venetian husbands. Amelot de la Houssaye places the chief blame on the men, asserting that they care far more for their courtesans than for their wives: ". . . their Mistresses are much more chargeable to them than their Wives, whom they use as their Servants." He adds:

But how indifferent soever they are for their Wives, they are so jealous of them, that in Carneval-time they dog them wherever they go; some have gone so far as to stab them upon bare suspicion, and have been thought brave Gentlemen for their pains. . . [Cf. *Othello*]. But they may well be jealous, for as wise as they are, there

will be stealing into their Quarters upon their Ladies . . . unless they band Nobility. (pp. 275-76)

The traveler John Ray makes a ty Fashion are kept in great rest abroad, except it be at Church, old Woman for their Guardian."⁷⁰

Saint Didier tells a fine anecdote ing just gone *out* of fashion, a f Venetian magnifico that shoes wit Commodious," to which "one o an Austere Meen, and twice rep Commodious, *Pur tròpo Comodi*

Because of the restraints on sometimes said to be able to slip masks at Carnival time. Such la this time by a Thousand differer and Guards," Carnival being the get in the Harvest of their Amo 56-57).

Pierre d'Avity provides a good *Venezia-città-galante* from the point Venice but laments her immorality says, looks as if it will last forever

. . . and although it seemes to sor which is committed dayly within t avoid her total ruine and subvers the magistrat who doth his best er there are many devout persons wh tion. (Sig. Zzv, p. 530)

* *

Which, then, of the two sides or or the dark, was predominant in Jonson? This is difficult to say, al rian calls the "almost obsessive p the licentiousness of Venice,"⁷¹ I si side was the dominant one. Bu importance here, since both side thus of great interest to the dram

will be stealing into their Quarters, and the *Senat* must keep Guards upon their Ladies . . . unless they can be contented with a Contreband Nobility. (pp. 275-76)

The traveler John Ray makes a typical comment: "Women of any Fashion are kept in great restraint here, seldom appearing abroad, except it be at Church, when they are sure to have an old Woman for their Guardian."⁷⁰

Saint Didier tells a fine anecdote on this subject. Chopins having just gone *out* of fashion, a foreign visitor commented to a Venetian magnifico that shoes with lower heels are after all "more Commodious," to which "one of the Councillors replied with an Austere Meen, and twice repeated it, They are indeed too Commodious, *Pur tròpo Commodi, pur tròpi*" (Part 3, pp. 23-24).

Because of the restraints on their movements, wives were sometimes said to be able to slip away only with the aid of their masks at Carnival time. Such ladies "as have Intrigues do at this time by a Thousand different ways deceive both Husband and Guards," Carnival being the season in which "the Gallants get in the Harvest of their Amours" (Saint Didier, Part 3, pp. 56-57).

Pierre d'Avity provides a good summary of the dark side of *Venezia-città-galante* from the point of view of one who admires Venice but laments her immorality. The Venetian Republic, he says, looks as if it will last forever:

. . . and although it seemes to some that for the great wickednesse which is committed dayly within the citie of Venice, she cannot long avoid her totall ruine and subversion, yet others know that besides the magistrat who doth his best endeavour to reforme all disorders, there are many devout persons whose prayers would stay this desolation. (Sig. Zzv, p. 530)

* * *

Which, then, of the two sides of the Myth of Venice, the bright or the dark, was predominant in the age of Shakespeare and Jonson? This is difficult to say, although despite what one historian calls the "almost obsessive preoccupation of foreigners with the licentiousness of Venice,"⁷¹ I suspect that, all in all, the bright side was the dominant one. But the question is not of great importance here, since both sides are exciting and colorful and thus of great interest to the dramatist.

Stoye summarizes clearly and wittily the reactions of Englishmen to Italy in general, and his remarks fit Venice as well:

It is difficult to say . . . whether the Elizabethans and Jacobean harped more constantly on the attractions or the repulsiveness with which they credited the Italian world; and for a few there was also the attraction of repulsiveness. A violent fluctuation from one extreme to another, when Italy appeared before the mind's eye, is one of the most familiar characteristics of their great dramatists. (p. 109)

V. The Myth of Venice in England

The attractions and repulsions (and the attraction of the repulsions) of Venice in England were much the same as in other parts of Europe, which is why in the foregoing discussion I have freely mingled English sources with those from other places. But two additional points need to be made: (1) Venice was sometimes thought of in England as different from other parts of Italy, and when that happened, generally (2) Venice was thought of more favorably than those other parts.

To get some distance toward understanding Venice's favored status in England, one can compare Lewkenor's *History and Commonwealth of Venice* (1599) with Sir Robert Dallington's *A Survey of the Great Dukes State of Tuscany in . . . 1596* (1605). Lewkenor has been accused of hyperbole in praising Venice,⁷³ and this charge is certainly true. But, as I have argued elsewhere, his hyperbole is really typical of, not more effusive than, that of most European observers who looked mainly on Venice's bright side.⁷³ Even people from distant parts of the earth, says Lewkenor, all ". . . speake of the cittie of Venice . . . to the highest of all admiration, as being a thing of the greatest worthinesse, and most infinitely remarkable, that they had seen in the whole course of their travels" (Preface, Sig. Av-A2). Dallington, by contrast, dwells so strongly on the dark side of the Elizabethan image of Italy that the Grand Duke's representative in England asked that the book be suppressed.⁷⁴

The differences between Lewkenor's Venice and Dallington's Tuscany may, of course, result from factors other than Venice's favored status; they could, for instance, be due largely to differences in the outlook and values of the two men. Therefore an even better test is provided by two books written half a century

later—better because they were written in the light of his *Instructions for Foreign Travel* (1609) and the light and dark sides of Italy as

The Italian, being the greatest embrace of Ladies of any other. Here he [the author] and Vice, Love and Hatred, Atheism, being a witty contemplative people Of the best wines you make your tartes

But nine years later, in *A Survey of the Glories of La Serenissima*, a (quoted earlier) about Venice and put the vices of the place in the balance. He admits that there are a lot of vices (the Republic) ". . . suffers not to mingle with her other Daughters. He also admits that Venetians are not entirely to blame for the prevalence of this infection from the Greek. Finally on this subject he adds:

. . . they say ther be multitudes of re who by their austere cours of cont for this loosne in others, and keep the last cense was made, ther we Nunns. . . . (pp. 8, 199[Sig. Ee])

William Lithgow, in a riot of alliteration of Gallants, Galleries, Gallies, Gallies, his description short: "Wherefore and the decorements of their be knowne by the better sort, I describe clearly indicates that Lithgow thought his description of Venice to be saturated

Venice, then, was the favored Italian to be over the hill: "Venice alone amid degradation and servility elsewhere its political flavor, suggests that the favored status were probably political gland and the Venetians had similar 1600: they were both interested in the Mediterranean. James was even

later—better because they were written by the same author. In his *Instructions for Foreign Travel* (1642), James Howell balances the light and dark sides of Italy as a whole:

The *Italian*, being the greatest embracer of pleasures, the greatest Courtier of Ladies of any other. Here he [the young traveler] shall find Vertue and Vice, Love and Hatred, Atheisme and Religion in their extremes; being a witty contemplative people; and *Corruptio optimi est pessima*. Of the best wines you make your tartest vinegar.⁷⁵

But nine years later, in *A Survey of the Signorie of Venice*, he dwells on the glories of *La Serenissima*, as, for example, in the poem (quoted earlier) about Venice and Venus (*S.P.Q.V.*). He tries to put the vices of the place in the best light possible. For instance, he admits that there are a lot of courtesans, but, he adds, She (the Republic) “. . . suffers not those frail vessels of pleasure to mingle with her other Daughters in Church-Communion.” He also admits that Venetians are given to sexual pleasure, but adds that “. . . Naples exceed[s] Her in this kind.” Nor is Venice entirely to blame for the prevalence of sexual vice: “. . . She may receive this infection from the Greek and the Turk Her Neighbors.” Finally on this subject he adds:

. . . they say ther be multitudes of reclusd men and women in Venice, who by their austere cours of continency make som compensation for this loosnes in others, and keep Her Citty from *sinking*; for when the last cense was made, ther were neer upon 5000 Fryers and Nunns. . . . (pp. 8, 199[Sig. Ee])

William Lithgow, in a riot of alliteration, praises “. . . the glorie of Gallants, Galleries, Gallies, Galleasses, and Gallouns,” but cuts his description short: “Wherefore since the scituation thereof, and the decorements of their beautifull Palaces, are so well knowne by the better sort, I desist. . . .”⁷⁶ This last comment clearly indicates that Lithgow thought the English market for description of Venice to be saturated.

Venice, then, was the favored Italian city. Others were thought to be over the hill: “Venice alone remained comparatively pure amid degradation and servility elsewhere.”⁷⁷ This comment, with its political flavor, suggests that the principal reasons for Venice’s favored status were probably political ones. To begin with, England and the Venetians had similar geopolitical interests about 1600: they were both interested in curbing Hapsburg power in the Mediterranean. James was even more eager than Elizabeth

had been for friendly relations with Venice, and the regularizing of diplomatic ties in 1604 must have added to the tendency of Englishmen to think more highly of Venice than of other Italian states.

And, as James's first Ambassador to Venice observed in a letter of 23 May 1603, Venice is ". . . a Signory that with long neutrality of State is at length (as it seemeth) almost slipped into a neutrality of religion."⁷⁸ Even the suspicion that Venice was basically anti-Papal would have raised *La Serenissima* in the eyes of many Englishmen. And that suspicion had long existed; since 1173, Molmenti notes, Venice had been under papal interdict five times, culminating (though too late to have affected the three plays under close scrutiny in this book) in the troubles of 1606-1607 in which Paolo Sarpi was, from the English point of view, the hero. Indeed, Sarpi created such a stir that Cecil and King James tried to persuade him to visit England.⁷⁹

Finally, Venice was the preferred Italian city partly by default—the alternatives being less palatable from a religious and/or political point of view. After all, Rome was the seat of the Pope, Naples was long associated with Spanish power, and Florence was the home of Machiavelli. The patriotic Englishman really had little choice.

And so the stage was set for the favorable growth of the Myth in England, and grow it did—so vigorously that it furnished considerable source material for three of the greatest plays of the age. To those plays we now turn.

The Merchant of Venice

Antonio. The Duke cannot take
For the commodity
With us in Venice,
Will much impeach
Since that the trade
Consisteth of all na-

There are three aspects of Venetian life in the sixteenth century, all of which are of special interest to students of Shakespeare. The first is the idea, already sketched, that Venice was the center of economic and military power. The second is the notion, clearly related to the first, of Venetian justice, that the Jewish community was especially rich and numerous and that Shylock was especially well. The first bears upon our interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*; the second, upon both *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta*; the third, upon Shylock.¹

I. Antonio and the Duke

When we look not directly at Antonio but at the sphere of mercantile wealth that surrounds him in the play, we are seeing again the bright side of the Myth of Venice. His connections with those trading companies that were great and particularly frequent in the sixteenth century are particularly frequent in the play. His "argosies with portly sai-