Shakespeare's Italy
Functions of Italian locations
in Renaissance drama

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VENICE: SPECTACLE AND POLIS

scenery and costumes were designed by Paolo Tommasi.


26 Dutton discusses the relationship between Volpone, the Gunpowder Plot and Lord Salisbury (pp. 147–8, and 151–3).


28 I have dealt with the problems of the play as a continuous performance of disguising in 'Volpone di Ben Jonson: la teatrality della simulazione', Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Comparative, 43, 4, 1990.

29 Tafuri, Venezia e il Rinascimento, p. 226.

30 'Franciscina' (Franceschina) and 'Pantalone di Besognosi' ('de' Bisognosi) are the commedia dell'arte characters quoted later by Corvino in II.i.4 and II.iii.8, when he stops Scoto's speech. For the use of commedia dell'arte characters in Jonsonian masques, and especially for the relationship between Inigo Jones's costumes and the Italian/Venetian dramatic practice, see R. Richards, 'Inigo Jones and the Commedia dell'arte', in The Commedia dell'Arte from the Renaissance to Dario Fo, ed. C. Cairns, Lewiston, 1989.


The idea of Venice in Shakespeare and Ben Jonson*

Leo Salinger

By the early seventeenth century imaginary foreign settings were very familiar on the English stage. An Italian court was the favoured setting for Jacobean tragedies of intrigue and revenge. And from the last years of Shakespeare's career, from about 1610 onwards, when peaceful relations had been resumed with Spain and Spain's cultural prestige was gaining ground, John Fletcher and others were beginning to turn to Spanish short-story writers, notably Cervantes, as previously they had turned to Italians, to furnish them with raw material for plots. Several of their comedies of romantic adventure are derived from one or a couple of Spanish novelas and were set in Spanish cities; for example The Spanish Gypsy (1629) by Middleton and Rowley, where the action, combining two stories by Cervantes, takes place in or near Madrid; or Fletcher's Rule a Wife and Have a Wife (1624), set in Valladolid. These and similar plays capture something of the spirit of Spanish cape-and-sword romances. Again, the action of Middleton and Rowley's outstanding tragedy, The Changeling (1622), is derived mainly from an English but partly also from a Spanish narrative source and is set in Alicante. But although these nominally Spanish or nominally Italian plays contain allusions to national manners and carry some local or topical references, none of them builds up a distinct impression of a particular foreign city. The sense of place in them is vague and generalised. In contrast, our impression of Venice is distinctive and strong in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice (produced about 1596), in Othello, the Moor of Venice (1604) and in Ben

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Jonson's *Volpone*, or *The Fox* (1605). These three plays belong, of course, to three different genres—romantic comedy, tragedy and satire—and none of them aims at a thoroughgoing local actuality or at a symbolical realism in the vein of Thomas Mann. But in each of them, the image or, better perhaps, the idea of Venice is more than a nominal location or a background; it becomes a pivotal factor in the whole unfolding of the play. The only other foreign city to be given a similar prominence in Elizabethan drama is classical Rome. But these three plays stand apart from the rest of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama in their portrayal of anywhere from the continental Europe of their own day. For the Elizabethans, Venice held a unique and complex significance; as Parker sums it up in his edition of *Volpone*, it was 'the exemplar of wealth, sophistication, art, luxury, political cunning, and stringent government'.

One broad reason for its significance lay in the expansion of English trade. By the end of the sixteenth century, London was a major international business centre, and since the 1570s English merchants had been active in the Mediterranean as well as the Baltic. The English were now trading directly in oriental luxury goods; English seamen fell captive to the Moors or the Turks, from Algiers to the Greek islands (and it is worth noting that the Witches in *Macbeth* intend some of their malice for a shipman 'to Aleppo gone, master o' th Tiger'); finally, there were English ambassadors at Venice and Constantinople, consuls at Tripolis, in Syria and Aleppo. All this meant continuous contact and competition with the Venetians. By 1600, London had outstripped her Mediterranean rival in population, with perhaps 200,000 inhabitants as compared with some 140,000 urban inhabitants in Venice. And Venice, no longer a major power in the western Mediterranean, was beginning to lose her eastern empire as well, especially with the fall of Cyprus to the Turks in 1571, a loss only partly offset by her share in the victory at Lepanto the same year. But, as Fernand Braudel tells us, her home industries were expanding 'in silk and woollen manufacture, glassmaking and printing', and Venice still dominated the trade of the eastern Mediterranean, with perhaps 'seven or eight hundred' ships entering and leaving her port every year about the turn of the century, and with a huge volume of monetary exchange that made the city what the historian calls 'a sort of capitalist empire'—quoting a contemporary to the effect that the Rialto was perhaps the best-stocked centre for exchange in Europe ('forse in Europa, non si trova altra piazza più commoda').

Visitors were impressed by the exceptional variety of nationalities to be seen in Venice, both travellers and alien residents. Montaigne commented that 'la liberté de la police de Venise, et utilité de la trafic la peuple [sic] d'étrangers', and Shakespeare's merchant, Antonio, enlarges upon the same theme:

> The duke cannot deny the course of law:  
> For the commodity that strangers have  
> With us in Venice, if it be denied,  
> Will much impeach the justice of the state,  
> Since that the trade and profit of the city  
> Consisteth of all nations.

Much the same might be said about Antwerp. But Venice was unique. While the rest of Italy was labouring under internal repression or foreign control, she maintained her comparative toleration and her independence as a city-state, thanks to her strict, efficient and secretive administration and thanks, it was said, to her strange but enduring form of government, described by an Englishman as 'a compounded form of state, containing in it an Idea of the three principal governments of the ancient Athenians and Romans, namely the Monarchical, the Oligarchical, and Democratic'.

Above all, perhaps, sightseeing tourists, already becoming frequent, were impressed by the unique townscape of Venice and the increasing splendour of her palaces. Montaigne, in 1580, was even disappointed because her famous 'rarities' were not as striking as he had imagined. But Shakespeare makes the pedant in *Love's Labour's Lost* air his knowledge of the saying 'Venetia, Venetia, / Chi non to vedi, non ti pretia.' And Thomas Coryat, after touring the Continent in 1608, lauded Venice as 'the Queen of the Christian world [...] the most resplendent mirror of Europe', and 'the most glorious and heavenly show upon the water', with 'her incomparable situation, surpassing wealth, and most magnificent buildings'.

Shakespeare and Jonson, however, make little or no dramatic use of the city's reputation for visual splendour. They concentrate rather on the idea of Venice as an aristocratic republic and cosmopolitan centre of capitalism, with her exceptional freedom for strangers and her exceptional attraction for travellers in search of sophistication. The image of Venetian society in their three plays is a refracted projection of London.
In Shakespeare’s narrative source for *The Merchant of Venice*, the medieval story by Giovanni Fiorentino, Venice is presented as a port with many merchants and ‘fine ships’, with festivities and ‘a reputation as a place of strict justice’, but no other descriptive characteristics. Ansaldo, named as ‘the richest Christian merchant there’, who is to sacrifice himself for the sake of his godson, the orphan hero, is introduced simply in his ‘counting house’, without further elaboration. But Shakespeare opens his play in the middle of a dialogue between Antonio and his friends, breathing an atmosphere of patrician leisure and introducing Antonio’s ‘argosies’ with their cargo of ‘spices’ and ‘silks’, their ‘portly sail’ outstanding from the multitude of ‘petty traffickers’ on the sea and ‘overpeer[ing]’ them — a sharply realistic image, if we go by the analysis of contemporary Venetian shipping given by Braudel. We hear later that his ships are bound severally for Tripoli, the Indies, Mexico and England (I.iii.16) and, subsequently, for ‘Lisbon, Barbary, and India’ as well (III.iii.267). The list, reminiscent of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*, strains probability but fits the heightened colouring of romance. Similarly, we learn that suitors from ‘every coast’ in ‘the wide world’ (at least, of Europe and the Mediterranean) have ‘come in quest’ of Portia (I.ii.167–72). More prosaically, we learn of Shylock buying a diamond in Frankfort and grasping at ‘news’ of his daughter ‘from Genoa’ (III.i.72 and 77). And through Shylock or in connection with Shylock we hear repeatedly of the Rialto as the focus of Venetian ‘news’ and business — three times in his first scene (where ‘What news on the Rialto?’ is a mechanical, evidently habitual, phrase of his), and twice again in the middle scene where he is torn between vindictiveness over Antonio’s losses and misery over the loss of his own daughter. Although some of these passages are poetically heightened, what is striking about the others is the way Shakespeare makes the speakers take their background naturalistically for granted, without any emphasis on local colour.

Shakespeare ignores such famous sights in Venice as St Mark’s Square, the Doge’s Palace, the Arsenal and (although he mentions a gondola) the Grand Canal. What counts for him dramatically in the idea of Venice is the theme of ‘venture’ (or ‘ventures’) and ‘hazard’ — words he uses more often here than in any other play; and secondly, the presence of Shylock, as a moneylender and a Jew.

In his first dialogue with Antonio, Bassanio compares Portia’s suitors with Jason (I.i.172), and Gratiano triumphantly echoes him later, in the scene of the double betrothal: ‘We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece’ (III.ii.240). Throughout the comedy, the ‘ventures’ of love and of commerce interchange and coalesce. As we hear, in the opening speeches, of Antonio’s merchant ‘ventures’ (I.ii.21 and 42), we hear also of the typical risks at sea that they entail (a topic absent from Shakespeare’s narrative source), though Antonio is confident that his risks are safely distributed. Then Bassanio touches on the admitted irrationality of ‘hazard’ in the ‘childhood proof’ he adduces — the analogy from his ‘school-days’, of shooting one arrow to retrieve another — as an embarrassed apology to Antonio for requesting yet another loan (I.ii.139–40 and 140–52). The second scene, of Portia with Nerissa, extends the idea of risk by introducing the ‘lottery’ of the caskets, which, rather than any considered choice, is to determine who will be Portia’s husband. Instead of the motif from his source story of the sexual trap set by the widowed Lady of Belmont, Shakespeare has his series of wooers’ casket scenes, with their emphatic refrain of ‘lottery’, ‘chance’ and ‘hazard’. Meanwhile, the third scene has introduced Shylock, with his sternly calculated ‘thrift’, as opposed to reckless ‘ventures’ at sea — and likewise, to Antonio’s trust in ‘the hand of heaven’ (I.iii.88). The tension between the differing human beings in ‘venture’ tightens through the middle scenes (partly by way of the episode of Jessica’s elopement, one of Shakespeare’s additions to the story) to the point in the trial scene where Portia defeats Shylock, not with a lover’s intuition, such as had apparently led Bassanio to choose the right casket, but with literal-minded logic, the weapon Shylock himself has favoured. Shakespeare turns what had been little more than a clever quibble in the original story (where the Jew had been given no character to speak of) into a stunning theatrical revolution. Even then, in his *decrescendo* after the trial scene, Shakespeare dwells on lovers’ irrational yet binding commitments, first through Lorenzo and Jessica’s litany of classical legends and then through the comic byplay over Portia and Nerissa’s rings.

Hostility between the Jew and the Christian is of course central to Shakespeare’s play, but it is hostility within a framework of comparatively free and frequent intercourse, wherein Shakespeare apparently reflects without exaggerating the real conditions in the Venice of his day. It was the freedom of Venetian institutions that attracted the Jews there, forming a relatively large community (over 1,600 by the 1580s). And over and above purely financial relations, some Italian Jews sought and found social relations with Gentiles, in spite of occasional prohibitions by the Church and the Jewish
VENICE: SPECTACLE AND POLIS

authorities alike. 'In 1592,' we are told, 'it was [. . .] necessary to reissue a ban in Rome forbidding Jews to teach Hebrew, singing, dancing, and other arts to Christians' (my emphasis); and 'the Jewish community in Padua in 1599 had to forbid the Jews to dance with Christians.' Shakespeare's invented episode of Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo and her subsequent conversion was unthinkable, therefore; such liaisons apparently occurred in fact.19

On the other hand, Shakespeare seems not to have heard about the ghetto; he seems to assume that Shylock lives in the midst of the Christians – as when Old Gobbo asks Launcelot, 'which is the way to Master Jew's? ' (II.i.31). And he dresses Shylock in a 'Jewish gaber-dine' (I.iii.107), possibly a standard theatrical costume for Jews, but unknown to social historians. Thomas Coryat was to observe that the wealthy Venetian Jews and Jewesses dressed resplendently, the men being distinguished from Christians by their headgear (red hats, he says, for the Italian- and western-born Jews, yellow turbans for the Levantines).14 Coryat also says that in Italy converted Jews forfeit their goods (as a penalty for their usury), so that they are left even naked, and destitute of their means of maintenance – which explains, he adds, why there are fewer Jews converted [in Italy], than in any country of Christendom.13 There would have been no need, then, to inflict two distinct punishments on Shylock, as in Shakespeare's trial scene. (In the original story, the frustrated Jew has simply '[torn] his bond and [torn] it in pieces in a rage'). Shakespeare's Jew is a superbly powerful dramatic creation, firmly grounded in the play's idea of Venice, but not in precise circumstantial knowledge.

So too with the Venetian aristocrats. Shylock sneers at their prodigality (II.v.15); Bassanio admits his past extravagance, and we see him distributing livers to his servants, including the newcomer, Launcelot, and giving them orders for the provision of a feast for his friends before he sets out to Belmont (II.i). But in sixteenth-century Venice, for all her public pomp and display, private extravagance was frowned upon. Indeed, the Venetians had a reputation for domestic meanness, which William Thomas alludes to in his Historie of Italie in 1549; while Montaigne remarked that although food was as dear as in Paris, Venice was extremely cheap to live in ('c'est la ville du monde où on vit à meilleur compte'), there being no need for attendants.10 Fynes Morson, travelling abroad at the time of Shakespeare's play, noted that the Venetians were 'covetous' in spite of their aristocratic pride, thought Italians generally were 'viciously frugal in housekeeping' and commented on the absence of menservants. Similarly, Coryat was shocked to see wealthy Venetian Senators buying their own provisions, and observed that they kept 'no honourable hospitality [. . .]' but a very frugal table', far removed from 'that noble state and magnificence' of the English aristocracy.12 In Shakespeare's medieval source-story the hero dines out and gives dinners in Venice.18 But the operative factor for the dramatist must surely have been the contrast between a lavish and a parsimonious style of living, not documentary accuracy.

There is also the broader contrast in the play between the tension in the city and the atmosphere of fairy-tale prevailing at Belmont. The effectiveness of the romance depends upon the contrasting thrust of comparative realism in the scenes at Venice.

In Othello, also drawn from Italian sources, this time a sixteenth-century tale by Giraldi, Shakespeare again makes dramatic use of the idea of Venice as an exceptional city-state. Again, the play involves conflict between insiders and a radical outsider, the Moor, turning again, therefore, on relative institutional freedom. Only the first act is set in Venice, and in the main action, in Cyprus, the imagined environment belongs to a military garrison rather than a town. But Venice was noted for giving military commands to foreigners, and Giraldi explains that because of his personal merit as a soldier, the Moor 'was very dear to the Signoria, who in rewarding virtuous actions ever advance the interests of the Republic'.13 The theme of promotion on merit, not on the strength of family or status, becomes a central thread in the tragedy, as in Iago's resentment towards his commander and Cassio. There is no threat to Cyprus in Giraldi's story, written before the Turkish conquest of the island, but Shakespeare supplies a fictionally altered version of the Turkish attack.60 This, with their escape from the play's invented tempest, lends an ironic sense of security to Othello and Desdemona – whom Shakespeare, unlike Giraldi, hurries to Cyprus immediately after the wedding. The Turkish threat also gives added force indirectly to the idea of Venice, which runs through the play.

Shakespeare provides Othello with royal ancestry in addition to pride in his personal values and with a history of exotic adventure that becomes both a credible source of fascination to Desdemona and a source of contrast to the other native, city-minded Venetians. Giraldi mentions in passing that the heroine's 'relatives' had tried to dissuade her from marrying the Moor. Shakespeare builds this hint into the
figure of Brabantio, as a self-important senator, just as he builds Iago into a subordinate officer hardened by urban as well as military experience; and he adds the idle gallant, Roderigo, to the group of native Venetian characters. Iago is jealous of Cassio partly for the very reason that his rival officer is a Florentine. When in the opening scene Iago and Roderigo set out to rouse Brabantio against his daughter’s secret elopement, they harp on social and racial prejudice; Iago, with vicious allusions to ‘an old black ram’, ‘a Barbary horse’, and Roderigo, more tamely, with reference to ‘a lascivious Moor’, ‘an extravagant [i.e. wandering] and wheeling stranger, / Of here, and every where’, Brabantio follows this lead, accusing Othello of seducing Desdemona by witchcraft, seeing that she had ‘shunned / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation’ (I.ii.67); and he repeats the charge before the Duke in the Senate scene, insisting that her defection is ‘Against all rules of nature’ (I.iii.101). In contrast to the impartiality and the State interest represented by the Duke, Brabantio expresses a socially confined mentality—a mentality that Iago, for his part, well knows how to exploit. He keeps his dupe, Roderigo, hopeful of an easy breach in the ‘frail vow, betwixt an erring barbarian, and a super-subtle Venetian’ (I.iii.356); and when the time is ripe he poisons Othello himself with the same insidious thought of cultural incompatibility:

I would not have your free and noble nature
Out of self-bounty be abused, look to ’t;
I know our country disposition well;
In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands."

(III.iii.203–7)

And further:

Ay, there’s the point: as, to be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposed matches,
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Where to we see in all things nature tends;
Fie, we may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion; thoughts unnatural.

(III.iii.232–7)

On which Othello, in soliloquy, naively comments, ‘This fellow’s of exceeding honesty / And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit, / Of human dealing’ (III.iii.262–4). He leaves the remote moral eminence of his military ‘occupation’—(a word to which Othello gives exceptional weight (III.iii.363))—for the role of a jealous husband according to Italian convention.

There is attraction and repulsion between Othello and the idea of Venice, and a dramatic rhythm in the naming of Venice or the Venetians as the play goes forward. The city is named only once in the first scene, but with special emphasis. Iago discourses to Roderigo about the service he has seen, ‘At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds, / Christian and heathen’—suggesting the city’s sphere of power (I.ii.29–30). Next, he proposes to ‘call up’ Brabantio, Roderigo says he will ‘call aloud’, and Iago incites him with a vivid urban image: ‘Do, with like timorous accent, and dire yell, / As when, by night and negligence, the fire / Is spied in populous cities’ (I.iii.75–7). All this prepares for Brabantio’s exclamation as he listens to their story incredulously from his window: ‘What, tellst thou me of robbing? this is Venice, / My house is not a grange’ (I.iii.105). Not merely a built-up city, as opposed to the countryside, but a capital, renowned for government and justice.

Venice and Venetians are named seven times in all in the first half of the play; then, fifteen times after Othello’s crisis of jealousy. While Othello’s character breaks down, the state reasserts itself from a distance. ‘Something from Venice’, ‘the great messengers of Venice’—Lodovico and Gratiano, who have come to recall Othello from Cyprus—are twice announced on the stage to the sound of trumpets (IV.ii.208, IV.ii.171). This resonates, as it were, through the last words of Othello, where he seems to wish to justify himself to the messengers as the champion of Venice and Christianity. It helps us to measure the force of Othello’s words if we notice that Fynes Moryson reports that Christians in the Turkish empire might not carry arms, and that the aggressiveness and arrogance of the Turks was such that a Christian traveller dared not look them in the face. No doubt some similar report lies behind Othello’s last words before he kills himself:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban’d Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduc’d the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus.

(V.ii.559–7)

Not only is the Moor now once again charming the attention of Venetian listeners—the listeners who have been forced to arrest him
with a story of his remote adventures, but he is doubly yet paradoxically identifying himself with Venice; once in the past and again by his present gesture, as he treats himself like the malignant Turk and assumes to himself the execution of Venetian justice. The tragic interplay between heroic outsider and the idea of the city continues until the end.

Evidently Shakespeare was deeply interested in the exceptional individual at odds with society. In a sense, Shylock and Othello are simply two of the strong-minded outsiders, villains or heroes, who follow in varied succession through his work, from Richard of Gloucester to Timon of Athens. They belong to their Venetian setting in that the social position of each of them would have been virtually inconceivable elsewhere, especially in London; but it could be said that Venice was provided as a setting by each of the novelle he was working from. Volpone likewise follows a main line in the author's thinking. But with Ben Jonson the location at Venice results from a deliberate choice.

Volpone, or the Fox, is a magnifico, without direct heirs, who gives it out that he is sick and dying so that clients will flock to him with extravagant gifts, each incited by the hope that he will be chosen to inherit Volpone's entire wealth. Aided by Mosca, his parasite, Volpone exploits the greed of his dupes until the two plotters overreach themselves, fall out and betray each other to justice. As a satiric moralist, Jonson was concerned with the motives at work in an acquisitive society and the pretensions it stimulated, in fantastic speculation, social adventurism, deception and self-deception. Before writing Volpone, he had set out his basic scheme of two cunning scoundrels plotting against their world and then against each other in his Roman tragedy Sejanus; and the same scheme reappears in his later comedies, notably The Alchemist. But Sejanus was grounded in classical history, and Jonson's later comedies are set in the London of the day. When he revived his early success, Every Man in His Humour, he transposed the setting of the comedy from Florence to London without altering the plot; and the basic scheme in Volpone is independent of an Italian setting. Indeed, Jonson took suggestions for the specific details of his plot partly from classical satire on legacy hunters in Horace, Petronius and Lucian, and partly from medieval beast fables and Reynard the Fox, having no connection with Venice. He apparently chose Venice for his setting because Venice was both the supreme type of a modern commercial city like London and by repute a parallel with the decadent splendour of classical Rome. And, more of a self-conscious scholar than Shakespeare, Jonson documented his Venetian background thoroughly from contemporary writers, John Florio, for example. (In his preface to the published play, Jonson asserts that he shows the punishment of his rogues at the end, unlike the usual procedure of comedy, in order to silence those who complain of the immorality of the stage; and the reputation of Venice for strict justice may have been a secondary reason for his choice of setting. But the judges in his comedy are of doubtful integrity, like nearly everybody else.)

The play opens with Volpone's hymn to gold and his dialogue with Mosca stressing his intellectual superiority - '1 glory,' he says, 'More in the cunning purchase of my wealth / Than in the glad possession, since I gain / No common way' (I.i.30). Venice is first named, in connection with the thought of conspicuous wealth, towards the end of the first act, when Volpone's third visitor, the merchant Corvino, says he has brought an orient pearl, 'Venice was never owner of the like' (Iv.10). Similarly, in the central episode, where Volpone tried to seduce Corvino's wife Celia, he offers her 'a carbuncle / May put out both the eyes of our St Mark', as opening to an amazing list of allurements of cosmopolitan origins, ancient and modern (III.ii.192). Meanwhile the play is thick with allusions to Italian authors and ideology in general ('ragion des stato', for example IV.i.141), and specifically to Venetian places, institutions, ranks and customs. We hear, for instance, of the Piazza and 'the portico to the Procuratie', of the Arsenal and the Lazaretto, of Volpone's 'long row of houses / By the Piscaria' (including a 'pretty [...] bawdy-house', it seems), and of his final, and fitting, relegation 'To the hospital of the Incurabili'. Much is said about chequis and other Venetian coins. There are comically knowing references to the Great Council and the Senate by the English visitors, Sir Politic Would-Be and his Lady, who furnish the sub-plot (IV.i.74 and IV.iii.1). When Volpone's attempt at seduction collapses he fears the intrusion of 'officers, the Saffi' (III.viii.16); then, regaining his elan, he adopts the disguise of another grade of police, 'One o' th' commandatori' (V.iv.114) - a whim that leads to his own arrest. Earlier, for his initial approach to Celia, Jonson has given him a disguise as Scoito Mantuano, the famous mountebank, in a superb, prolonged display of a charlatan's eloquent ballyhoo, thickly larded with expressions from colloquial Italian (II.ii). This mountebank scene is a striking application of local colour. At the same time, it is a development and an exposure of Volpone's essential role, as he throws himself into the part of a charlatan vending impossible gratifications.
The superlative ‘cunning’ of Volpone and Mosca starts from and ends in self-delusion, like the gross expectations of their dupes. Such is the guiding principle of the action: Venice is a solidly imagined city, but its glamour is a mirage. The satire is extended on a lower register by way of the English couple, the Politic Would-Bes. The wife is a vociferous bluestocking; the husband, as his name implies, a mindless copier of others (Sir Pol, the parrot), a ridiculous amateur of statecraft. They both represent contemporary types that Jonson was to use again, in his London comedies. Here they are caricatures of fashionable travellers and, through their gullibility, parodies of the Venetians. They have come here ‘to draw the subtle air’ of the place (IV.i.66). The wife spouts Italian writers’ names indiscriminately, but also she ‘Lies here in Venice for intelligence’ (a sharply appropriate term) ‘Of tires, and fashions, and behaviour / Among the courtesans’ (II.i.27); her credulity about the famous courtesans (another touch of local colour) leads her to farcical disarray. Her husband is equally credulous about mountebanks and their momentous secrets; access to hidden subtleties is part of his vanity. In the approved style of a fashionable traveller he delivers ‘instructions’, adapted to ‘this height of Venice’, and keeps a diary. He makes ‘observations’ and writes ‘essays’, and his talk is full of ‘news’, financial ‘projects’, ‘policy’, plots, spies and the guarded behaviour a foreigner needs in Venice — on the possession of which he absurdly deceives himself. The foolish Would-Be couple underline the empty grasping behind the ‘cunning’ of the leading characters. Also, beyond implicit analogies, they anchor the play in London through satire on the type of traveller attracted to Venice precisely by its reputation for exotic and distinguished subtlety.

For all his use of local colour, then, Jonson as well as Shakespeare, adapts his image or idea of Venice to his own dramatic purpose. Neither dramatist sets out to make knowledge about a foreign city, or even knowledge about the experience of travel, a theatrical subject in itself. Both, essentially, are reacting to English life and thought. On the other hand, English self-awareness in Shakespeare’s time was stimulated (if not provoked) by the new voyages and increased contacts with Europe. And, apart from indulging nationalistic prejudice, the theatre valued a sense of foreignness, either for the sake of an aesthetic distancing useful for satire, a kind of Brechtian alienation, or else for the sake of the raised emotions of romance. The idea of Venice constituted the keenest and firmest meeting between English knowledge about Europe and the English dramatic imagination.
Dobbin on the Rialto: Venice and the division of identity

Avraham Oz

The identity riddle by which Launcelot Gobbo is 'try[ing] confusions' with his blind father to the utmost force of comic cruelty is supposed to be resolved in measuring Launcelot's apparently non-existent beard against the hair of Gobbo's 'fill-horse', Dobbin, as a test case by which the father can truly recognise his son. Has Launcelot, a talking animal of humble origins, developed similar traits to mute Dobbin, whose name and the measure of his hair are the only parts in him which talk in the course of the play? Are their physical delineations, and hence their identities, interchangeable? Though these questions remain unanswered, the analogy itself turns out to be misleading: Dobbin's tail cannot serve, as it happens, to measure Launcelot's imaginary beard, unless it 'grows backward' (*The Merchant of Venice*, II.ii.55, 89–93). Unlike the case of the former comic entry in the canon, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this latter anomaly is unacceptable within the dramatic framework of *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the only mysteries, it seems, relate to maritime and other commercial contingencies that find their economic representation by the rise and fall of rates in the Rialto: these, rather than natural organisms, are the only phenomena in Venice that can grow backward or leap forward, as Shylock's purely economic account of Biblical mysteries such as Jacob's sheep would attest. And yet in an English play about Italy presented before an English audience, in which an Italian peasant named Gobbo would call his horse Dobbin, both measures and identities are rather strange and admirable than growing to something of great constancy. After all, Launcelot's riddle of identity is hardly a momentary whim: his father has just surprised him while rehearsing his proposed transformation from being 'Launcelot the Jew's man', a problematic move, since his conscience strongly advises him against it.