

## Shakespeare and the Venetians

Venice is, of course, picturesque, charming, magical, a city that floats on water, indeed a modern Atlantis, a fabled city sinking into the ocean. You've likely seen movies filmed there, and yet the first sight of Venice will astonish you. Whereas North American cities tend towards homogeneity, Venice is like nothing else in the world. Yet Venice is a paradox. The city that is *sui generis*, one of a kind, is also the model of the modern city. Venice is Venice; yet Shakespeare's Venice is also Shakespeare's London, which is today's London, which is our New York, which is our Dallas or Kansas City or Toronto or Los Angeles. That is, although Venice is the most distinctive of all cities, all the great cities of the modern world are new Venices—commercial oligarchies, dominated not by landed, hereditary aristocrats, but by merchant-adventurers, such as Antonio or Brabantio, or Donald Trump or Bill Gates, so that Venice may be thought of as the first modern city. Shakespeare, as I think our discussions will reveal, understands that a whole way of life follows from Venice's devotion to trade, which is *our* way of life.

Venice is now Disneyland for adults, the Magic Kingdom on the Adriatic, an unreal place of romantic charm that now exists almost entirely for tourism. But its founders didn't settle on a series of inhospitable islands surrounded by tricky currents in order to open hotels and restaurants: they came running, or paddling, for their lives. They were fleeing the barbarian tribes—Huns, Lombards, and Ostrogoths—streaming down the Italian peninsula after the collapse of the Roman Empire, and they found a safe-haven, but one that challenged them and shaped their character: the channels difficult to navigate, the frequent flooding that would wash away whole islands, the construction of a city on marshes and silt, all would make the Venetians an especially resourceful and

resilient people. Thus, the water which always surrounded and threatened them also blessed them. The Venetians soon became masters of the sea and thus masters of trade, developing to a high degree the commercial virtues of industry and risk-taking. And they honored the sea through a remarkable ritual celebrated every Ascension Day: the *doge*, or duke, would be rowed out into the lagoon on the *Bucintoro*, his ceremonial barge, to drop a golden ring, a wedding ring, into the water to symbolize and reaffirm Venice's marriage to the sea. The image is worth meditating on: Venice conceives of itself as the husband of the sea. Venice's position on the Adriatic Sea, between Italy and Constantinople, between Northern Europe and the Middle East and Africa, helped make it the commercial center of the world. Venice's position also allowed it a dual cultural inheritance. Venice is Italian-speaking and Roman Catholic, yet it was initially under the authority of and culturally influenced by the Byzantine Empire. Hence, its most prominent church, the many-domed San Marco, was modeled on the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. In Venice the eastern and western parts of Christendom met.

Little is known of early Venice. The Rialto, where Shylock and Antonio will do business, was settled in the fifth century, and the first doge appears to have been elected in 697. But two stories of early Venice give a sense of the character of the city. The Venetians did, in fact, claim to know the exact date the city was founded, March 25, 421. Why the year 421? Two other years from the fifth century, 410 and 476, give us a clue, the years Rome was first sacked and then overthrown by the barbarians. Venice is born then while Rome is dying; it is the new Rome, arising from its ashes. Why March 25? Count ahead nine months and then count back nine months—to the Feast of the Annunciation. Here we have a bold, if not blasphemous claim: the incorporation of

Venice is associated with, if not akin to, the Incarnation of Christ. Venice is the New Rome, but one blessed by Christ.

The other story also involves religion in the service of politics and sounds like a legendary fraternity prank, but appears to be partly true. Venice had a patron saint, St. Theodore, but they weren't entirely satisfied with him. For starters, Theodore had been Greek, and the Venetians were in the process of freeing themselves from Byzantine authority. Moreover, they wanted a "big-name" saint. The following analogy may help: just as today growing cities want major league sports franchises to prove their importance—Jacksonville wanted an NFL team in the mid-90s, Raleigh, an NHL team a few years later—so too did cities in that very religious age want the patronage of a well-known saint. And just as a stadium will bring that team, so too did a saint's relics bring that patronage. St. Theodore was holy, but not many people can tell you who St. Theodore was. But most everyone who has picked up a Bible or gone to a church service can identify St. Mark, one of the four evangelists. His incorrupt body was in Alexandria, Egypt, where he had preached, been its first bishop, and then been martyred. In 828 two Venetian merchants arrived. The city had been conquered by Muslim armies about a century earlier, but most of its population then was still Christian, and the shrine was treasured. But the Venetians, according to one version of the story, to get their hands on Mark, dealt very straightforwardly with the Christian guardians of the city: they bribed them. But the rulers of Alexandria, who profited from Christian pilgrimage to the shrine, would certainly not allow the body to leave, and their noses must have told them some funny business was afoot: according to one legend, when the body was removed from its tomb, the odor of sanctity permeated the whole city, so that "if all the spices of the world

had been gathered together in Alexandria, they could not have so perfumed the body.”

But the Venetians were prepared for anything and had brought a substitute body to put in the tomb. And when the Muslim custom inspectors demanded to examine the Venetian cargo, they found one large crate, on the bottom of which was hidden the body of St. Mark, filled with ... pork (which Islamic teaching decrees unclean and forbidden). Being good Muslims they shut the crate in disgust, the body was snuck out and brought to Venice, and a great church—not the cathedral but the basilica attached to the Doge’s Palace, the city’s political center; in it we see again Venice’s political appropriation of religion—was built to house the relics. And so the Winged Lion of the evangelist Mark has become the symbol of Venice, and for almost one thousand years Venetians went into battle crying, “Viva San Marco!” But of course in stealing the body of St. Mark, the Venetians were not committing any sin; they were only *doing the will of God*. For, as the Venetians suddenly started claiming, in a previously *unknown incident* from the life of St. Mark, the Evangelist had made it all the way to the top of the Adriatic Sea where he had heard the voice of an angel of the Lord say “*Pax tibi, Marce, evangelista meus. Hic requiescat corpus tuum*” (Peace to you, Mark my evangelist. Here will your body rest”). So now you will see throughout Venice images of the Winged Lion looking at a book open to the words “*Pax tibi, Marce.*” This story from early in their history tells us much about these Venetians, about their audacity, guile, intelligence, ambition, and civic pride.

Under the patronage of the Evangelist, Venice entered its heyday, the period from around 1000 to 1570, when Venetian galleys dominated the Adriatic and the eastern Mediterranean, and parts of what are now Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, Greece and the islands of Cyprus and Crete, Lebanon, Israel, Libya and

Tunisia were at times part of the Venetian Empire. The city was not without its problems: there were rivalries between old and new merchant-aristocrats, trade ebbed and flowed, and wars with rival trading cities Genoa and Pisa and then with the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire exhausted Venice. And in the early sixteenth century, during a brief respite from the centuries-long struggle against the Muslim Turks, a number of great Christian powers, including France, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Papacy, united to destroy Venice. Yet Venice survived and remained the envy of Italy and Europe, a beautiful, powerful city whose stability and prosperity earned it the title, *la Repubblica Serenissima*, the Most Serene Republic.

How did they do it? How did they go over *one thousand years* without foreign invasion or civil war? Certainly the devotion to trade helped. The business of Venice was business, and the great families brought up their sons to be businessmen and commercial adventurers; Marco Polo, for example, was Venetian. Young men of great energy and spirit were brought up to direct that spirit towards commerce, and commerce tends to benefit from and promote political stability. Thus, Venice was the New York of the day, and the Rialto its Wall Street. As one fifteenth century visitor wrote, “merchandise passes through this noble city as water flows through a fountain.” If wool were being shipped from Holland to Egypt or spices from the Orient to England, these products most likely went through Venice, on Venetian ships, funded by Venetian merchants. These ships were made in the Arsenal, where thousands of fiercely patriotic workers, the Arsenalotti, produced galleys that were considered the best in the world. Dante wrote of the Arsenal in his great poem, *The Divine Comedy*:

[I]n the Arsenal of the Venetians,  
All winter long a stew of sticky pitch

Boils up to patch their sick and tattered ships  
That cannot sail. Instead of voyaging,  
Some build new keels, some tow and tar the ribs  
Of hulls worn out by too much journeying;  
Some hammer at the prow, some at the stern,  
And some make oars, and some braid ropes and cords;  
One mends the jib, another, the mainsail.

(*Inferno*, 21.8-16)

What Dante was describing was the first great assembly line, relying upon the division of labor and interchangeable parts, established more than half a millenium before Henry Ford opened his factory in Detroit.

That stability through economic prosperity was complemented by a confusing, labyrinthine political system, a republic during an age of monarchies and tyrannies, but a republic that combined aristocracy, monarchy, and democracy into a distinct mix.

Venetians bragged that they had achieved the mixed regime which Aristotle had said was the best of all types of government. In a city of usually around 150,000 people, around 1,000 had voting rights as members of the Grand Council, 200 were senators, and six were part of the Doge's cabinet. But in a system of checks and balances that partly inspired America's Founding Fathers, all sorts of other agencies had authority, the most notorious and sinister of which was *i Dieci*, the Ten, the council for state security.

Troublesome Venetians might suddenly disappear in the middle of the night if they had attracted the unfavorable notice of the Ten. Or they might be found the next morning swinging from a gallows in the piazzeta by San Marco, a warning to potential malcontents to watch their step. You will see at the Doge's Palace the antechamber where Venetians who had been summoned by the Ten might have to wait anxious hours, sitting and sweating and squirming, before learning of their fate. But in Venice frequent elections ensured that no individuals ever completely controlled agencies such as the Ten.

The Doge too was elected, in a process that looked like our Electoral College on steroids: to prevent bribery and factionalism, the Grand Council would vote for electors, some of whom would then be chosen by lot to vote for electors, who would vote for electors, some of whom would be chosen by lot to elect the new doge. The doge was the chief executive at the top of this political pyramid, and outside the pope he was probably the most majestic figure in Europe, his person bearing almost religious significance. He was, for example, the only layman allowed to wear a hat in church, the *cornú*, the horn-shaped cap that symbolized his office. Yet he was surprisingly powerless because of the Venetian fear of great men. Venice was unlike Florence, in which fame was the highest good—“Reputation, reputation, reputation. O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself!” says the Florentine Michael Cassio in *Othello*. Such concern with personal glory in Florence, however, provoked conflict and instability. In contrast, Venice did everything in its power to keep ambitious men, potentially triumphant Caesars, from gaining popularity and seizing power. The average age of an elected doge in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was 72; the electors did not want the doge to live too long and acquire too much power. The old men who were elected became essentially imprisoned by their office, rarely allowed to travel out of the Doge’s Palace and never permitted to conduct state business without cabinet members present or even to open their own mail. As you will see at the Doge’s Palace, they were typically depicted in art as kneeling before the Winged Lion, a symbol of their position in relationship to the state. They could not erect statues of themselves nor could anyone during the glory days of the Republic. When a mercenary named Bartolomeo Colleoni agreed to fight for Venice only if a statue of himself be placed outside of San Marco after his death (he even left money

for it), the Venetians agreed, but then after his death the statue was erected not in front of the Basilica of San Marco, but outside a chapel devoted to St. Mark in the Church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo in a more obscure part of town.

These political and economic arrangements helped to create a distinct cultural life. As previously mentioned, Venice drew to it people from all over the world, and the Venetians, whose devotion to money-making frequently seemed stronger than their devotion to their faith, were quite tolerant of other religions and allowed the construction of Eastern rite churches, synagogues, and mosques for foreign traders. Venice frequently butted heads with the Papacy, whose political claims Venice consistently opposed. Yet Venice remained obedient to Catholic doctrine, and the Reformation had no effect. The Renaissance did, however, and with its wealth Venetians patronized great artists, including Bellini, Carpaccio, Titian, Veronese, and Tintoretto. That great wealth also allowed the Venetians to establish charitable guilds which looked after widows, orphans, and the poor.

Yet this great wealth also inevitably led to a taste for luxury, which coincides with and seems to be a cause of Venice's decline, something already evident by the time Shakespeare is writing *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. A dramatic change occurred in the characters of its citizens, especially its nobles. The Venetians, once known for their propriety in social life and resoluteness in war, became decadent, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Venice became famed for its legalized gambling, Carnivale, and prostitution. Family life was collapsing and Venetian wives, once regarded as especially chaste, no longer were thought to be so. Iago's cynicism has some basis in fact: "I know our country disposition well: / In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not

show their husbands” (3.3.201-3). As one eighteenth century Frenchman put it, “Women do not taste their pleasures here; they devour them.”

European aristocrats came to Venice to sample the life of pleasure, but also for a more respectable reason, to enjoy its sophistication, beauty, and urbanity. Venice continued to be renowned for its painters, such as Canaletto and Tiepolo, and now was famous for its musicians and numerous opera houses. Monteverdi wrote what many consider the first opera, and Arcangelo Corelli, the violin virtuoso, the first orchestral concerti. Vivaldi, the composer of *The Four Seasons*, was choirmaster at the *Pietà*, an orphanage for girls famous for the musical education offered there. But the orphanage was full, with girls not only born out of wedlock abandoned there, but also girls from rich families whose parents feared future dowries would eat into the family’s wealth.

So despite these achievements in the fine arts, there was something hollow in the Venice of the eighteenth century. They were no longer threatened by the Turks, but now there were no wars demanding heroism and service to the city, no longer any great patriotic purpose. The city was still prosperous, living off the achievements of earlier generations, but trade was declining as commerce switched from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. The city sunk further and further into hedonism. No longer were the world’s best ships made at the Arsenal. No longer did nobles take seriously their political responsibilities, as most preferred their country villas on the mainland to meetings of the Grand Council. It was an age of “wealthy, curled darlings,” to quote Brabantio in *Othello*, Shakespeare’s other Venetian play. A city which once carefully selected stoic, determined, patriotic old men as doges elected in 1779 Paolo Renier, who was secretly married to a Greek tightrope walker and was rumored to have bribed 300 members of the

Grand Council to get elected. He was a coward. He spoke so softly during his coronation speech that people could not hear and shouted for him to speak up. He thought they were angry and were rising up in rebellion, and so in the middle of his first address to the people of Venice he turned tail and tried to run away, kept from doing so only by his aides. He was despised ... but tolerated, something an earlier Venice would never have done. A few years later he died at the beginning of Carnivale and was buried at night so that his death might remain a secret until Lent, when the business of electing a new doge would not spoil the fun.

The following passage from the historian John Julius Norwich well captures the degradation of the age: “There is always something sad in the spectacle of departed greatness. ... It is impossible to close our eyes to the fact that a city that was once the unchallenged mistress of the Mediterranean ... could now no longer control the approaches to her own lagoon; or that a people famous for centuries as the most skillful seamen, the shrewdest and most courageous merchant adventurers of their time, were now better known for their prowess as cheapskates and intriguers, gamblers and pimps.” So too the English poet Robert Browning captures this period in lines from his poem about the Venetian composer Baldassare Galuppi:

As for Venice and its people, merely born to bloom and drop,  
Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop.  
What of soul was left I wonder when the kissing had to stop?

The kissing did have to stop: In 1797 Napoleon invaded Italy. Almost 1400 years after the first Venetians fled to the lagoon to escape the Huns, Napoleon announced, “I shall be an Attila to the state of Venice.” The Senate dithered and the doge was irresolute, and Napoleon sensed the weakness of will. When he invaded Venetian territory, the inhabitants of the *terra firma*, Padua, Verona, and the other parts of northern Italy that had been under Venetian rule since the fifteenth century, fought bravely and ran into battle crying “Viva San Marco!” The Venetian working classes also were willing to defend their city. But the great families of Venice had no stomach for a fight. With the French army on the march toward the city and its warships approaching the lagoon, the Venetians surrendered before a shot could be fired. Napoleon’s armies took possession of a city that had never been conquered before. In his palace the last doge took off his *cornú*, turned to his valet, and said, “Here. I won’t be needing this anymore.” The *cornú*, the *Golden Book* in which were kept the names of all the Venetian nobles, images of the Winged Lion torn down from all over the city—these and other symbols of Venice were thrown on a bonfire started by the triumphant French in Piazza San Marco. Soon after, Venice was annexed by Austria and in 1870 became part of the newly unified Italy, but save for a heroic but futile and brief rebellion in 1848, the most independent of cities had lost her independence for good.

There is a happy footnote to the cowardly surrender to Napoleon. French warships did not need to bomb the city. Like a fly in amber, the most beautiful city of the Renaissance has been preserved. Shakespeare would not recognize today’s London, but Shylock and Antonio would recognize today’s Venice. The city has been preserved to satisfy tourists. But the preservation of the Rialto and San Marco and the Frari also

preserves the memory of a particular way of life, one especially rich but also potentially dehumanizing and corrupting, a way of life that is maybe much like our own and so worth reflecting upon as you read *The Merchant of Venice* before you enter the waters of the lagoon.