



## **VENICE IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME**

At the time in which Shakespeare was writing, Venice was one of the most important sovereign states in Italy. In 1600 its area and population size was comparable to London's (about 150,000 inhabitants) and, due to its key importance in the maritime traffic in the Mediterranean, it constituted also a melting pot of different cultures attracting, amongst others, Turks, Greeks, Spaniards, Slavs, Jews, Moors and, of course, Englishmen. Venice was viewed by London as a competitor in trade. Two Charters issued in 1592 and 1600 gave the monopoly of the trades between England and Venice to a group of London merchants. Therefore, it is likely that Shakespeare wrote his two plays set in Venice, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* in a period when the English were greatly interested in the Italian republic.<sup>1</sup>

As some accounts show, English travellers to Venice during the Renaissance were awestruck with the uniqueness of a city resting on a multitude of islands. The sheer beauty of Venetian architecture and buildings, such as the Basilica of San Marco, Rialto Bridge and the Palace of the Doge (the Duke of Venice) and the Arsenale would have left a significant impression on the English person travelling through Venice for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

The city was renowned for its economic prowess, which had been built through the commercial routes of its ships to Asia and Africa. These trade routes and the massive presence of foreigners on the territory ensured that Venice was regularly supplied with goods and products from across the globe. The city could rightfully be regarded as the 'marketplace' of the world, as well as, 'a summary of the universe, because there is nothing originating in any far-off country but it is found in abundance in this city'.<sup>3</sup> In Venice you could find spices imported from Egypt; silk fabrics from Byzantium; western woollens passing through towards the East; Italian raw materials like cotton, silk and glass; and an abundance of food, such as grain, meat and cheese.<sup>4</sup> In addition to its status as a mercantile hub, Venice also operated a major banking system, which confirmed its status as the richest and most abundant city in the world. The city received profits not only through trades but also through very heavy taxation. Venetians were also sustained by the huge revenue which derived from the Jewish community practising usury.<sup>5</sup>

The political independence of Venice was also a source of pride: a 'free' city-state with its own rules and statutes, not subject to the restrictive laws of an empire. Venice was liberal and neutral in its dealings with foreign countries, representing a strong commercial power. At the same time, the Republican government, ruled by the Doge (Duke) and the Senate, was an example of wisdom and fairness in the exertion of strict rulings and law.<sup>6</sup> The city rested on the sound Republican principle of equality and there was little corruption or favouritism in political charges. For example, two members of the same family could not work together in the same political office, ensuring that power was not concentrated in the hands of a single family, but could thrive and create union among different people.<sup>7</sup>

In these conditions, multi-culturalism flourished: people from any country or creed were tolerated, as long as they respected the Venetian law. Some foreigners were temporary visitors, others were absorbed by the Venetians, and others united in big communities in order to retain their cultural identity.<sup>8</sup> Venice was not without its prejudices, however, as we see in the creation of the Jewish ghetto in 1516, and other statutes which restricted the freedoms of Jewish residents of the city.

The way the English viewed Venice was with a mixture of admiration and skepticism. Reasons why the 'myth' of Venice was constructed have already been discussed above, but it was specifically the political dimension of the city-state which intrigued the English: the stability of the Venetian Republic stood in sharp contrast with the uncertainties that surrounded the exclusive, hierarchical order that characterised early modern England.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the great economical power of Venice as the centre of maritime commerce in the Mediterranean

was praised, but the fact that the city imposed heavy taxes on imported goods made some people think that its wealth and good reputation was not destined to last long, especially bearing in mind the benefit of other ports in Italy, such as Genoa.<sup>10</sup> It was admired for its location at the centre of European civilisation – the Jerusalem of Christendom, yet viewed with suspicion as geographically, it was somewhat displaced towards the East.<sup>11</sup> The fact that Venice was a Catholic state throughout the Renaissance was central to the English perception of the city.<sup>12</sup> However, the fact that Venice had defied papacy in the early seventeenth century gave scope for intrigued, English diplomats, such as, Sir Henry Wotton, to define it as a potential Protestant state.

---

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honingmann, The Arden Shakespeare Third Series (London: Methuen, 1997), 8–9

<sup>2</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare and Venice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 23

<sup>3</sup> Holderness, 24

<sup>4</sup> David Jacoby, 'Cretan Cheese: A Neglected Aspect of Venetian Medieval Trade', in *Medieval and Renaissance Venice* eds. Donald E. Queller, Ellen E. Kittell, Thomas F. Madden, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 49–68 (49)

<sup>5</sup> Holderness, 25

<sup>6</sup> Holderness, 26

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Hadfield, 'Shakespeare and Republican Venice', in *Visions of Venice in Shakespeare*, eds. Laura Tosi and Shaul Bassi, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 67–82 (71)

<sup>8</sup> Holderness, 27

<sup>9</sup> Hadfield, 67

<sup>10</sup> Holderness, 24–25

<sup>11</sup> Holderness, 32

<sup>12</sup> Peter G. Platt, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 59