

Mythical Venice(s)¹

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I. Introduction

My project is to make some sense of "The Myth of Venice", which by the 19th century had become multi-faceted. In the course of our Institute, we have grown accustomed to hearing about multiple Venices, mythical and otherwise, which stimulated my interest in this subject. My account will bring together history, historiography, architecture and art, geography, and other disciplines which are usually separated, but which seem necessary for the elucidation of this topic.

I will approach the Mythical Venice(s) under three headings:

- A. The Mythicizing of Venice: The Myth is Promulgated (14th-17th centuries);
- B. The Mythicizing of Myth: The Myth Proliferates (19th-20th centuries);
- C. The Merchandizing of Venice: The Myth Degenerates (20th-21st centuries).

The first is the political-cultural myth of Venice, the creation and promotion of a myth as part of the usable past for political purposes (similar to the American melting pot myth). The second is a kind of "Venice as Museum", obviously susceptible to wild romantic fantasies as Venice became a quintessentially myth-fostering or enabling environment, part of the Grand Tour for the progeny of wealthy Europeans (Grand Tours, it must be noted, technically started in the 18th century), and perennial target of poets and writers. The third is "Venice as Theme Park," as fantasy degenerates into kitsch and farce to cater to the entertainment function/experience that attracts modern consumers.

Why should we care about any of this? Apart from particular preferences for truth, accuracy, or facticity? I would argue that our Institute remit is with an actual

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Venice, past and present, with actual people, particularly the Jews of Venice. Davis and Marvin write:² "What we have found pervasively in the worldpublic mind is that there is no *real* Venice here....visitors often fail to see or intuit such mundanity....Venice is not a real city, with a real city's inhabitants and constraints, but a backdrop and a stage for one's gaze, emotions, and passions."

Davis and Marvin also speak of the parallel Venices: "one of determined fantasy; the other stuck in a far too real world of overcrowding, decay, and discomfort."³ While we can all enjoy the former, our primary concern is with the latter—over time—with *the* or *an* authentic Venice that Shaul has so movingly advocated.

So what is the "myth of Venice"? My guess is that if we went around the room, we would get a dozen or more differing definitions. In other words, the myth of Venice itself has become mythified and in the end we will need to speak of "Mythical Venices", not just the Mythical Venice.

²Robert C. Davis and Garry R. Marvin, *Venice: The Tourist Maze* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 1-2. I would like to thank Paul Hamburg for loaning this and numerous other books to me during the course of our Venice Institute.

³Davis and Marvin, *Venice*, p. 5.

II. The Mythicizing of Venice: The Myth is Promulgated (14th-17th centuries)

The original "myth of Venice": was the claim that Venice was the true successor to the ancient Roman Republic.⁴ The Venetian constitution was supposedly modeled on that of the Republic as a continuation of Rome by freedom-loving refugees fleeing the barbarian invasions to the safety of the lagoon. This myth was cemented in 1543 by Gasparo Contarini's *De magistratibus et republica venetorum*.⁵

Historian James Grubb writes: "the prevailing vision of Venice has been remarkably consistent and persuasive and has been transmitted substantially unaltered in guidebooks and histories since its full articulation in the sixteenth century: a city founded in liberty and never thereafter subjected to foreign domination; a maritime, commercial economy; a unified and civic-minded patriciate, guardian of the common good; a society intensely pious yet ecclesiastically independent; a loyal and contented populace; a constitution constraining disruptive forces in a thousand-year harmony and constancy of purpose; a republic of wisdom and benevolence, provider of fair justice and a high degree of toleration."⁶

According to D. A. Chambers and Deborah Howard, this official myth was fired by the sack of Rome in 1527, politically in Chambers' account and architecturally / artistically in Howard's.⁷ As Venetian fortunes revived and Rome's declined in the 1520s, three of the most significant architectural leaders of the age came to Venice: Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1554) from Bologna; Jacopo Sansovino (1486-1570) from Rome; and Michele Sanmichele (1487-1559) from Verona. "These architects had the credentials

⁴D. S. Chambers, *The Imperial Age of Venice, 1380-1580* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), pp. 12-31; Deborah Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 161 ff.

⁵James Grubb, "When Myths Lose Power: Four Decades of Venetian Historiography," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 58 (1986), p. 46.

⁶Grubb, "Myths," 1986, pp. 43-44. See also Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and David Robey and John Easton Law, "The Venetian Myth and the 'De Republica Veneta' of Pier Paolo Vergerio," *Rinascimento*, Vol. 15 (1975), pp. 3-59.

⁷To this we should add Donald E. Queller's *The Venetian Patriciate: Reality versus Myth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), for a discussion of the political uses of myth.

to provide Venice with the new Roman idiom that would symbolize the recovery from the traumatic war years [of the League of Cambrai] and from the epidemics and famines of the late 1520s....to formulate the architectural expression of the 'Myth of Venice.'"⁸ Joined by local architect Antonio Scarpagnino (1505-1549) and funded by Doge Andrea Gritti (1523-1538), their "common aim [was] to restore the grandeur of ancient Rome on Venetian soil."⁹

Historical geographer Dennis Cosgrove summarizes: "By the late 16th century, the central node of Venice expressed a complex symbolic structure, understandable in terms of the humanist ideas shared by the Venetian patriciate and in terms of the Venetian myth. San Marco was a concrete representation of the perfection of Venetian institutions. The Doge's Palace...represented monarchy...The two wings of the Procuratie...defined the boundaries of the 'place of eloquence, of Minerva': the Piazza San Marco. Here republican freedom was celebrated in the daily discourse of Venetian citizens. It opened towards the sacred legitimation of Venice, the Basilica San Marco. Opposite the Doge's Palace stood the Marcian Library, the seat of Humanist wisdom...."¹⁰

That this political-historical "myth of Venice" was deeply linked with its environment, is also stressed by Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan's recent essay "Toward an Ecological Understanding of the Myth of Venice."¹¹ For Venice, "reality cannot be separated from its *mis en scene*...Images, in other words, have once again shaped historical thinking."

Couple this with the nearly simultaneous transformation of the Venetian myth

⁸Howard, *Architectural History*, p. 162.

⁹Howard, *Architectural History*, p. 166. Cp. p. 175, which notes that Sansovino's Marcian Library "embodied exactly what they [the Venetians] were seeking—a transposition of the ancient Roman style of building on to Venetian soil."

¹⁰Developed in Dennis Cosgrove, "The Myth and the Stones of Venice: An Historical Geography of a Symbolic Landscape," *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 8 (1982), pp. 145-169.

¹¹in: John Martin and Dennis Romano, eds., *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 39-64. The quotation is from p. 40.

in another significant way in the work of Sansovino and his successor Palladio (1508-1580). Both, Deborah Howard writes, "were sensitive to the theatrical character of the city, integrating their buildings into the urban fabric of Venice like pieces of scenery on a stage." Palladio, indeed, "inspired Venice, above all, by his capacity to create striking, memorable, and satisfying visual effects" like San Giorgio Maggiore (1565-1576) and the Redentore (1577-1592).¹²

Shakespeare intuited things very well when he had Othello describe Venetian life: "Tis a pageant to keep us in its false gaze."¹³ (This is, of course, one of the main political purposes of a civic myth: to generate unity and to stifle dissent.) William Dean Howells echoes this in his picture of Venice as a stage.¹⁴ It wasn't a huge leap for the civic "Myth of Venice" to morph into the Mythical Venice of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Wordsworth's poem "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic" (1802, 1807) provides both a summary and a transition:

Once did She¹⁵ 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.¹⁶
 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 expose the everlasting Sea.

¹²Howard, *Architectural History*, p. 208.

¹³William Shakespeare, *Othello, Moor of Venice*, Act I, Scene 3.

¹⁴W. D. Howells, *Venetian Life*, third edition (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1887), Vol. I, pp. 9-12. Howells has been somewhat maligned in our Institute, but he starts *Venetian Life* with a catalogue of "sentimental errors...which no doubt form a large part of everyone's associations with the name of Venice" including "that pathetic swindle, the Bridge of Sighs." (pp. 12-13); and he cites with approval Ruskin: "The Venice of modern fiction and drama is...a stage dream, which the first ray of daylight must dissipate into dust."

¹⁵I need to do further research to trace just when the Venetian emphasis went from the very masculine Lion of San Marco to the Bride of the Sea. Iconography would be useful here.

¹⁶Another component that needs more study is to find when Venice became the exemplar of liberty.

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.

III. The Mythicizing of Myth: The Myth Proliferates (19th-20th centuries)

With the death of the Venetian Republic in 1797, mythmaking about Venice reached critical mass and the process exploded far beyond the political-historical dimensions that were expounded in the 16th century. The Myths of Venice or the Mythical Venice pushed the historians aside.¹⁷

It is at this point that the singular "Myth of Venice" becomes itself a myth, though James Grubb notes that even the "Myth of Venice" always lacked specificity: "Exemplar of what? There never was a seamless myth of Venice; it has accurately been described as polyhedric, a simple structure but one whose components differ...in orientation and implication."¹⁸

Many of these have been variously mentioned over the course of the last four weeks. In no particular order:

1. Shakespearian myths, concerning which, there appears to be no end;
2. W. D. Howells and Paul Weideger's mythical Ghettoes;
3. The Romanticized poetic myths of Venice;
4. The Anti-Romantic poetic countermyths of Venice;
5. Myths of the Ghetto: home or prison?¹⁹
6. The Aestheticizing Myth of Ruskin;²⁰
8. The Snob Appeal Venice alluded to by Regis Debray: "In France, the Venice 'Religion' is first and foremost a mark of social distinction, a logo (so to speak) signaling

¹⁷Though as Grubb, "Myths," 1986, and Claudio Povolo's essay on "The Creation of Venetian Historiography" in: Martin and Romano, *Venice Reconsidered*, 2000, pp. 491-519, show, the historians kept pretty busy well into the 20th century.

¹⁸Grubb, "Myths," 1986, p. 46.

¹⁹Benjamin Ravid: "If the Ghetto had for over 280 years been their prison...it had also been their home and, to a very real extent, their refuge in a sea of Christians. From the introduction to Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, eds., *The Jews of Early Modern Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. vii. See also Benjamin Ravid, "Between the Myth of Venice and the Lachrymose Conception of Jewish History. The Case of the Jews of Venice," in: B. Cooperman and B. Garvin, eds., *The Jews of Italy: Memory and Identity* (Bethesda MD: University Press of Maryland, 2000), pp. 151-192.

²⁰Davis and Marvin, *Venice*, p. 212.

to the common herd the existence of an aristocracy of taste."²¹

These, and other Venices, were part of the process of converting Venice into a kind of living (more or less) museum, a nice place to visit, but a little less nice to live in long term. Ironically, for most of its existence, Venice was a very pragmatic place whose strength was commercial and political pragmatism.²²

Thus it was in the 19th century that Venice became important for its image²³ above all else, "whether for the Grand Tourists of two centuries ago or for the mass tourists of today."²⁴

²¹Regis Debray, *Against Venice*, (London: Pushkin Press, 2002), p. 75.

²²Davis and Marvin, *Venice*, p. 2.

²³On the steadily expanding influence of "image" in the modern world, and on the transformation of the traveler into the tourist, see Daniel Boorstin's delightful *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper, 1964), pp. 77-117.

²⁴Davis and Marvin, *Venice*, p. 6. Davis and Marvin's book is primarily concerned with "How this image has been both created and consumed."

IV. The Merchandizing²⁵ of Venice: The Myth Degenerates (20th-21st centuries)

At the end of the 20th century and on into the 21st century, the myths of Venice continued their downward trajectory into pure kitsch. Here is a sampling of these *reductio ad absurda* of the myths of Venice.

"Ahh. The sweet and exotic texture of unexplored lanes, hidden treasures in an ancient market place, warm cafe afternoons. Of time spent traveling, not touring. But wait, where's my spacious oceanview suite? Where's my 5 pm seaweed wrap and my complimentary fine wine with dinner?—Fear not. It's right here where you left it. Aboard your Radisson Seven Seas ship anchored conveniently nearby and ready to whisk you off to yet another day of adventure and discovery."²⁶ As Dave Barry says, I'm not making this up.

However, the mythicized Venice of a cruise ship parked off of San Marco is still inconveniently located in hot, sticky, foreign northern Italy. This problem is solved by the mythical Venice of American billionaire Sheldon Adelson's 1.5 billion dollar The Venetian resort in Las Vegas, complete with full scale versions of the Doge's Palace, the Piazzetta, the Campanile and segments of the Piazza San Marco, the Rialto Bridge, the Bridge of Sighs,²⁷ the Ca' d'Oro, and 365 meters of Grand Canal, gondola rides included.

I'm not making this up either: "No trip to Venice—or to the Venetian—would be complete without a graceful and romantic glide down the Grand Canal in an authentic Venetian gondola [actually considerably shorter than the real thing and driven by electric motors rather than actually being paddled by a real, sweating gondolier]. Float beneath bridges, beside cafes, under balconies and through the vibrant Venetian street scape as your singing gondolier sweeps you down the Grand Canal for a 'thrill ride' like

²⁵Cf. the original title of Shakespeare's play which was "The Merchandizer of Venice," and focused on the complex relationship between Antonio dal Wal-Mart and Shaul-lock de Bassi.

²⁶Quoted in Davis and Marvin, *Venice*, p. 205. See the Radisson website at www.radisson-seven-seas-cruises-discount.com/search_mar90010.html for excruciatingly funny detail.

²⁷Query: is a replica of the Bridge of Sighs more or less of a "pathetic fraud"?

no other.²⁸ A relaxing and romantic ride that reveals all the charm, excitement, and passion that is Venice..."²⁹ No word yet if Adelson is planning to add a full scale version of the Jewish Ghetto that will reveal all the charm and excitement of the Shoah...

Significantly, too, Adelson's Venice eliminates both the religious symbolism of the Basilica San Marco and the intellectual symbolism of Sansovino's Marcian Library. Why are we not surprised?

And, finally, this: "The filming has just finished on *Secret Passage*, a film set in 15th century Venice, and the scenes are full of the city's exquisite vistas, its famous canals and bridges, stately palaces and elegant churches....made on a set [in Luxembourg] that just a few years ago was a steel works....*Secret Passages*...is a drama about the persecution of the Jews in 1492 when Spain ordered them to convert to Roman Catholicism or flee the country. The story follows one such exile to Venice where she meets and falls in love with a nobleman. Why not film in Venice itself?... [The producer] says there are too many tourists there, and the city is unwilling to inconvenience them for the sake of filmmakers.³⁰ Hotels are too expensive...and few 15th century buildings have been faithfully preserved. So the city [i.e., the Mythical Venice] was recreated...at a cost of around \$6 million....it took a year of research by production designers and is 'completely fictitious.' No actual canals or buildings have been copied, 'but the set respects 100% the style, and the size, and everything else about Venice at that time'" the producer said.³¹ Any further commentary on this breathtaking mode of thought would be superfluous.³²

²⁸Query: why the quotation marks? Possibly a citation from Shakespeare or Marin Sanudo? This might be the subject of one or more doctoral dissertations.

²⁹Quoted in Davis and Marvin, *Venice*, pp. 289-290; further details, pp. 284 ff. The Venetian's web site is a delight of kitsch: www.venetian.com/

³⁰Imagine that!

³¹*Europe*, June 2002, p. 37.

³²Mention should be made here of other artificial Venices: Venice, California, as well as the Venice segment in DisneyWorld.

V. CONCLUSION

Everyone comes to Venice with an ideal, a fantasy, and/or a vision...despite the fact, as Henry James wrote over a century ago about Venice: "There is nothing left to discover or to describe, and originality is completely impossible."³³ Ole Hank failed to reckon with the likes of Radisson Seven Seas' PR flack and Sheldon Adelson.

On the other hand, hasn't our Institute discovered a lot about the Jews in Italian and Venetian culture? About the Ghetto? About ourselves as persons and as teachers? Won't the work we do and works that we produce in the future reflect that? And doesn't awareness of Ruskin's observation that Venice has a "charm which is of its spectator's creation"³⁴ or Davis and Marvin's warning that "the multiple illusions that Venice projects or, and onto itself, often tempts us away from our own academic disciplines and into the roles of travel writer and sentimental tourist"³⁵ put us on guard against the worst excesses?

Furthermore, history isn't static: James's Venice didn't experience the 20th century Age of Tyrannies, Totalitarianism, or the Shoah. The existence of over a century of "Modern Times" surely makes a difference.

The beauty of being an intellectual, of course, is that while we were probably attracted to Venice by one or another of the Myths of Venice, we can turn on our mythical muse and debunk it, all the while nourishing our infatuation with the Mythical Venices. It's a little bit like the collector of comic books who, upon finding that grownups aren't supposed to read them, invents the study of popular culture and respectably (and possibly profitably) continues to collect and read comic books while lightly ironizing and pitying those who simply enjoy them. So, too, with our Mythical

³³Henry James, *Italian Hours* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 290. Incidentally, this didn't prevent James and hundreds of others from saying it anyway. Amusingly enough, this complaint had been voiced as early as the late 15th century by Pietro Casola, who wrote that Venice was a place "about which so much has been said and written...that it appears to me there is nothing left to say." Quoted in Davis and Marvin, *Venice*, p. 15.

³⁴John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (New York: Lovell, Coryell, [1851], Vol. I, p. 50.

³⁵Davis and Marvin, *Venice*, p. 5.

Venices. We pursue them under the cover of scholarly analysis while lightly ironizing and pitying tourists, memory seekers and makers, and others less able to rationalize their preferences and tastes into demythologizing for fun and profit.

Of course, we are "authorized." We were invited here by that irrepressible modern mythologizer, the Leon Modena of the 21st century, Marvelous Murray, the merchant of myth, to participate in a magical mythical mystery tour of the Venetian past and present. We started out, under Shaul's urging, trying to correct mythperceptions of Venice and wound up making a bunch of new myhtakes, further "empowered" by an official notice that I saw on a vaporetto poster: "Our Venice is Your Venice." But I won't tell if you won't, and I hope the fun continues.