ELIZABETH THROUGH VENETIAN EYES

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Almost paradoxically, Venice’s place in the Elizabethan imagination exceeded its actual place in Elizabethan foreign politics. In Volpone, the fast and loose dealings of the Rialto provided Ben Jonson a convenient cover for his satire on London’s own commercial classes. Shakespeare used the famously cosmopolitan city as the setting for two different plays foregrounding racial and ethnic hatred, Othello and The Merchant of Venice. Padua was a Venetian possession in Shakespeare’s day, and its university was under Venetian auspices. Perhaps Kate, in The Taming of the Shrew, owes as much as Portia and Desdemona to the Venetian reputation for “super-subtle” women (Oth. 1.3.356).1 Given the city’s association with women who defied patriarchal convention, it should come as no surprise that common rumor linked Elizabeth herself—the woman whose frail female body belied her kingly heart and stomach—with the city. The great seventeenth-century gossip Francis Osborne reported longstanding speculation that Elizabeth “had a Son bred in the State of Venice,” although Osborne himself argued that such rumors were more suited to a “romance” than to a serious history (Osborne 2: 42).2

One of the things that made Venice loom so large in the English imagination was its remoteness: England had comparatively few commercial, and even fewer political contacts with Venice during Elizabeth’s reign. The foreign powers that mattered most for England in the sixteenth century were along the North Atlantic: France, Spain, and Spain’s rebellious subjects in the Netherlands. The papacy had a huge mythic impact on English thinking, but its diplomatic significance lay in its close relationship with Spain. If Venice did not matter much to England, England mattered even less to Venice. As Venice tried to preserve its waning reputation as the master of the Adriatic and eastern Mediterranean, it was mostly concerned with the expansionist empires that controlled the Mediterranean’s eastern and western ends: Spain and Turkey. It also
fretted a lot about Spanish influence in Italy and particularly on the pa-
pacy (Lane 241–49; Finlay; Gleason). Until the very end of Elizabeth’s
reign, when English ships started appearing in the Mediterranean in
larger numbers than ever before and interfering with Venetian trade, the
Republic did not worry much about England.

One sign of England’s relative non-importance to Venice was the
Republic’s failure to send an ambassador or even an envoy to Elizabeth’s
court until the last weeks of her life. By the late sixteenth-century, ex-
changing resident ambassadors had become a common feature of diplo-
matic practice. But the diplomatic culture of Early Modern Europe was
continually evolving, and the terms governing the exchange of ambassa-
dors in one context did not necessarily apply to another.3 The exchange
was not always reciprocal, and not all residents enjoyed the rank and title
of “ambassador.” Fairly regular diplomatic communication often unfold-
ed between powers who had no official diplomatic relationship with each
other. For example, when Elizabeth needed to deal with Venice or vice
versa, negotiations typically took place under the auspices of a third na-
tional party. The English ambassador to the French court often discussed
Anglo-Venetian matters with the Venetian ambassador to France. Almost
everything that the ruling Venetian signory knew about English affairs
came to them second-, third-, or even fourth-hand, through the reports
of their ambassadors to France, Spain, the Empire and of their Bailo, or
merchant-diplomat, stationed in Turkey.

This diplomatic indirection is where my story begins. Given the
evolving nature of sixteenth-century diplomatic practice, Venice’s fail-
ure to honor Elizabeth with a resident ambassador was not necessarily
an expression of hostility or contempt. Nevertheless, Elizabeth took it
as one. For four decades, her ambassadors to various European courts
expressed her resentment to their Venetian counterparts on almost every
possible occasion. Their persistence raises important questions about the
relationships between material interests and more elusive understandings
of national and monarchical dignities in the Early Modern period. Why
did Venice hesitate to acknowledge in more formal terms the reality of a
relationship that it continued to enjoy with England, and why did that
hesitation so annoy Elizabeth, given its relatively insignificant practi-
cal consequences? I want to argue that Venice’s formal alienation from
Elizabeth arose from a diplomatic stance that paradoxically linked the
republic directly to her: a commitment to political neutrality in the face
of Reformation and Counter-Reformation efforts to divide European