SODOMY AND VENETIAN JUSTICE IN THE RENAISSANCE*

by

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This essay deals with Venetian legal procedures against sodomy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is an historical investigation of a specific crime as it appears in certain archival records. The criminality of that sexual act was a given, supported by references to the Bible, and partially explained by social patterns and attitudes which I have tried to indicate. But neither the records nor this essay can fully answer the larger question of why the sexual deviant was rejected with such horror and persecuted with such urgency. Are human hatreds any more explicable than the varieties of human love or the shapes of human experience?

In its endeavor to excise sodomy wherever it appeared within its society, the Venetian Republic was not unique. Florence, Siena, and Rome could, among many other cities and states of that period, provide similar stories. This one belongs to Venice and is a story of detail, of particular cases in a particular setting. Much of its interest derives from the governmental procedures it invoked and helped to develop, for the Venetian government was renowned for its order, stability, and systems of justice. How that government dealt with an act it deemed as destructive as murder, treason, arson, or counterfeiting, forms the following narrative. My intent has been simply to present that narrative as fully as the information I found allowed me, and although there is herein much to pity and much to protest, this is a story without a moral.

* This essay, some years in the making, has profited at different stages from the helpful suggestions of Ann Carmichael, Stanley Chojnacki, Gaetano Cozzi, Felix Gilbert, Werner Gundersheimer, Margaret L. King, Reinhold Mueller, Charles Rose, Guido Ruggiero, Giovanni Scarabello, and Richard Trexler: to all of them, my thanks.

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I. - Introduction

To speak of Venice and deviant forms of sexuality will not surprise anyone aware of the legends of Venetian license which were the commonplaces of English sixteenth and seventeenth-century literature. The city of the lagoons long enjoyed a reputation for loose living and sexual liberty, perhaps most picantly stated by James Howell who wrote of Venice that 'she melts in softnes and sensualitie as much as any other [place] whatsoever; for, 'tis too well known, ther is no place where ther is lesse Religion from the girdle downward'. Yet, the purpose of Howell's book, published in 1651 and entitled a Survay of the Signorie of Venice, was to present the Venetian state as an exemplum of independence, strength, and justice, to portray 'her constitutions, and Government, wherein ther may be divers things usefull for this Meridian', i.e. for Commonwealth England.

Such admiration for the Venetian State can be found as early as the thirteenth century when the Venetian concern for the res publica was contrasted with the private and conflicting pursuits followed elsewhere in Italy by faction-torn city-states. No less a visitor than Petrarch praised Venice as an asylum of tranquillity, and eulogies of the Venetian government became a traditional refrain in European thought. The Florentines in their revolutionary and republican deliberations of 1494 looked towards Venice as an almost magic model and built a great hall to the specific dimensions of the Venetian Maggior Consiglio, hoping to introduce by architectural exactitude the less tangible qualities of the revered Venetian polity. In the early part of the sixteenth century, Gasparo Contarini, a member of the Venetian noble class, enshrined what he perceived to be the balance, the concord, and the impartial justice of this government in a book which became the principal vehicle for what we now call the Venetian myth. By Shakespeare's and Howell's time, the Venetian reputation for justice and careful enforcement of law was as established as her reputation for a libertarian style of

2. This comment is found in Howell's Table of Contents.
4. Francesco Petrarch, Lettere Senili, vol. 4, p. 3, letter to Pietro da Muglio (August 10, 1364); 'unicum libertatis ac iustitiae templum fuerit'.