David G. McPherson. *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990. Pp. 157.

I welcome to my casual collection of books on Venice and Venetians (one of them called *38 Venezie*) this succinct study, attractively produced, as it should be, given its subject.

Venice has always been a city of the mind and imagination, created by both out of a *tohu bohu* of swampy tideland. The wit of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* lies in the fact that one highly visible city is a greater curiosity than any of those other instances where we seem to see the fancy outwork nature. A force in the real world to be reckoned with by kings and kesars, armies and navies, by Christendom East and West and by Islam, Venice has astounded myriads of visitors over the centuries, whether they came as crusaders or as tourists on the Grand Tour or the mass tour, and it was particularly attractive in the time of Shakespeare and Jonson, to both the judicious and the frivolous traveller (pp. 49-50).

The "Myth" of Professor McPherson's title and text is fourfold – Venice the Rich, Venice the Wise, Venice the Just, and *Venezia-città galante*, each having its bright and its dark side (p. 27). The first and last of these need little explanation; the middle two in discussion tend to merge. Venice relied for its university on nearby (and dependent) Padua and was not itself academically wise like *Bologna la dotta*; and she produced no great mind to set beside Dante or Machiavelli or Vico. Her wisdom and her justice are embodied in the complex and effective institutions of a political economy which impressed thoughtful observers of the European scene from the time of Montaigne to that of Milton.

The quality of Professor McPherson's treatment of the three Venetian plays of the English Renaissance is well indicated by his concluding observations on their distinctiveness one from the others:

In *The Merchant of Venice* the outstanding function of the Myth is to lend some credibility to two fairy-tale plots without, at the same time, destroying the atmosphere of romance. Venice was thought to be such an exotic place that the poet could give his characters a local habitation without reducing them to the plainness of the workaday world. In *Othello* the larger aspect is the sense of doom and inevitability felt by those in the audience who know that Cyprus had long ago and forever fallen, and that the sexual reputation of Venice was such as to breed suspicion like the shambles breeds flies. In *Volpone* a heightened sense of the pervasive and excessive theatricality in both ancient Rome and its modern reincarnation, Venice, contributes to an understanding of the crucial thematic relationship in play between theatricality and identity: one must know who one is, and the best way to lose that knowledge is to be constantly playing the role of someone else (p. 118).

The treatment of each play abounds in useful and suggestive details. For instance, in the discussion of *The Merchant* it is observed that Shakespeare's main

source makes little reference to the actual city and that major characters like Portia and Shylock have no names of their own but are called “la donna di Belmonte” and “il Giudeo”: “Shakespeare’s play is a good deal more realistic than Giovanni Fiorentino’s story” (p. 68). Again, one could find one’s way round the Venice of *The Merchant* but would be quite lost in the Vienna of *Measure for Measure*. From such well observed details it is possible to build solid structures. Three aspects of Venetian social and economic history, all connected with the Myth, apply to the play:

One is the idea ... that Venice was declining as an economic and military power. The second is a related phenomenon which modern historians call the turn landward. The third is the notion, clearly related to the Myth of the impartiality of Venetian justice, that the Jewish community in Venice was especially rich and numerous and that Venice treated Jews especially well. The first bears upon our interpretation of the character of Antonio; the second, upon both Bassanio and Portia; the third, upon Shylock (p. 51).

The discussions of *Othello* and *Volpone* have comparable virtues. However, to prove that I have read this book with attention as well as with pleasure, I should touch briefly on a few points that might be reconsidered if it goes into a paperback edition. In an old map reproduced on p. 16 the Piazza San Marco is said to be “near the top”: actually, in a 10 x 10 grid, it would be in square 39. For an illustration (p. 25) of the costumes appropriate to Venetian notables, the caption identifies “Volpone in *Volpone*” and “Othello in *Othello*,” as if we didn’t know. Again, the madrigals of Monteverdi are distinguished from those of “the Venetian school” (p. 42). Monteverdi began his career and made his name at Mantua, to be sure, but he spent his last 30 years as choirmaster of San Marco, and so it must be explained why this master is not regarded as of the Venetian school.

William Empson is cited only through another writer (p. 139, n. 1). Empson’s essay on *Volpone* is one of the weaker performances of a great critic: he says, for instance, that *Volpone* breaks the law only by impersonating a police officer, forgetting his attempted rape of Celia and his conspiracy in obstruction of justice. But it deserves proper citation: *Hudson Review*, 21 (1968), 651-6. A more germane and much more considerable article is one which must have been contemporary with the writing and publication of this book: R. B. Parker, “An English View of Venice: Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*,” in Sergio Rossi and Dianella Savoia, eds., *Italy and the English Renaissance* (Milan: Unicopli, 1989), 187-201. Jonsonians will wish to read both.

Professor McPherson’s whole treatment of *Volpone* as protean shape-shifter, of his love of role-playing – especially classical roles with a relish of decadence – is deftly handled in the context of Venetian theatricality. At the end, however, comes the comment:

He drops all roles and stands before the court as his true self – the healthy magnifico . . . Though he has imitated others so much and so long that he is almost unable, when necessary for his essential dignity, to return to himself, he does finally come back: 'I am Volpone.' And that, I think, is one of the chief reasons that we have considerable sympathy for him. In the end, he rediscovers who he is (p. 105).

As a summary of the final impression left by the whole play, this does not quite match mine. I find "true self," "healthy magnifico," and "essential dignity," much too positive; and the "sympathy" I feel for Volpone and the other culprits at the end is inconsiderable. Several times throughout the play, Volpone has already jumped out of his assumed role to resume his character of magnifico without any improvement of moral stature. The truth is not in him, there is no health in him, nor is there any sign here of regret, let alone repentance – only the wolf's black jaw as he savages his accomplices. The word "essential" seems remote from this protean improviser, and I would prefer "defiance," even "magnificent defiance," to "dignity," which implies worth. I am probably in a minority here in denying any tragic quality to this grand comedy. It is good to be able to argue with a real writer with real opinions.

Finally, the illustrations are well chosen, and the frontispiece in colour of part of a view of Venice in *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1593) is a delight.

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