



Università  
Ca' Foscari  
Venezia

Corso di Laurea specialistica (*ordinamento ex  
D.M. 509/1999*)  
in Lingue e Letterature Euroamericane e  
Postcoloniali

Tesi di Laurea

Ca' Foscari  
Dorsoduro 3246  
30123 Venezia

# HISTORICAL NOVEL IN VENICE

**Relatore**

Ch. Prof. Shaul Bassi

**Correlatrice**

Ch. Prof.ssa Michela Vanon

**Laureando**

Stefania Zitta

Matricola 809152

**Anno Accademico**

2014 / 2015

# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

\*

Introduction	p. 3
Sarah Dunant	p. 6
<i>In the Company of the Courtesan</i>	p. 8
Understanding the context of <i>In the Company of the Courtesan</i>	p. 10
Literary choices in <i>In the Company of the Courtesan</i>	p. 14
Between History and Fiction: <i>In the Company of the Courtesan</i>	p. 21
Venice and <i>In the Company of the Courtesan</i>	p. 38

\*

Roberta Rich	p. 66
<i>The Midwife of Venice</i>	p. 68
Literary choices in <i>The Midwife of Venice</i>	p. 75
Understanding the context of <i>The Midwife of Venice</i>	p. 90
Between History and Fiction: <i>The Midwife of Venice</i>	p. 94
Venice and <i>The Midwife of Venice</i>	p.116
Conclusion	p.129
Bibliography	p.134

# INTRODUCTION



*Put on very dark sunglasses, protect yourself. Venice can be lethal. In the historic center the aesthetic radioactivity is extremely high. Every angle radiates beauty; apparently shabby: profoundly devious, inexorable. The sublime pours in bucketloads from the churches, but even calli without monuments, the bridges to the rii (small canals), are picturesque at the very least. The façades of the palazzo are blows of the face, as kicks are blows of the feet. You are face-butted, slapped, abused by beauty. Andrea Palladio topples you over. Baldassarre Longhena lays you flat. Mauro Codussi and Jacopo Sansovino finish you off. You feel terrible.*

Tiziano Scarpa, *Venice is a fish*

Venice: many myths show many different ways to think about her. The wise and profitable Republic, she was firstly historical myth. Then, Byron contributed to create the romantic and decaying city. It is difficult to catch all the details taking a single photo; here, life has always been different from any other place, it depends on where is the point of view from where you are observing things. Venice has so much art that she could be considered a single monument as a whole, in which nature, monumental architecture, canals, *calli*, *campi* and *campielli*, form a whole

unity. Approaching Venice means to satisfy intellectual curiosity, as well as to understand the language and the message of a painting, of a sculpture, of a work of art in general; it is fundamental to comprehend the events and the reasons which led to the creation of her kind of art to better understand both her creative and artistic value. A tourist can find countless testimonials of the Venetian presence in the world and can realize how strong could be her temperament and her conquering nature; just think of the four horses in St. Mark church taken from Constantinople, or the two columns of the Piazzetta, or the lions in the Arsenal also taken from the East, for example. *(It is, of course, the mark of great cities to filch their most treasured possessions from somewhere else: Venice herself is a perfect example, since half the pillar of the basilica and the triumphant snorting horses that grace in front of are stolen from no less a place than Constantinople itself<sup>1</sup>).*

Remembering what Goethe wrote to his friends about his first voyage to Italy, Venice has not to be seen with our eyes, but with the eyes of our understanding; who wants to visit Venice should think about how to program it, making accurate choices that originate from the desire to understand a context of inexhaustible interpretability, where dignity was achieved with intelligence, efforts, patience and tenacity. This is the way I have chosen to know Venice, and this is the kind of approach I recommend to anyone.

I would like to end this introductory part saying that it is the love for this marvelous city that inspired my work. The aforementioned words by Scarpa are the mirror of what can happen to someone who sees Venice for the first time; as a result, he stares at her. Every time I went to attend some lessons at University, I thought that, sooner or later, I would write

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p. 278.

something about her as a sort of present, a kind of tribute for her timeless, extraordinary, incomparable great beauty, for all the funny and weird experiences, for the emotions she has given to me. It is not the city you expect to see. You can read about her, see images, photographs, paintings on books, but I believe (and I dare say that I am not the only one) that if you do not see her with your own eyes, living her, you miss something precious, it is as if there was a sort of "gap" in your culture. There you learn how to use better all your senses, you will realize that you take them for granted: Venice is training for your legs, thrill for your touch, magic for your eyes, food for your mouth but above all for your heart and mind; and here I stress the idea that a visit to Venice should be reasoned. So I decided to make a very special "journey". Generally, in the mind of a traveller (or in mine, anyway) this means taking a plane, or staying in a place for a long time, possibly very far away from home, from everyday life. But this time, my destination is only sixty kilometres, more or less, far from where I live. And to make it, I chose two special *travelling companions* who lead me through Renaissance Venice: Here begins my literary journey *In the company of a Courtesan* and of *The Midwife of Venice* and here I stop, quoting with a smile, Jan Morris' words: *There's romance for you! There's the lust and dark wine of Venice! No wonder George Eliot's husband fell into the Grand Canal.*<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Jan Morris, *Venice*, Faber and Faber, 1960, p. 304

## SARAH DUNANT



Sarah Dunant was born in London in 1950. She studied History at Cambridge University becoming very interested in theatre at that time. She worked widely for the BBC as a presenter and a producer, travelling abroad for many years through America, India, Japan and Asia in general; then she became a famous and internationally acclaimed bestselling writer. Her work ranges over many genres and eras. Her first novels are written in a thriller form, exploring themes such as drugs, terrorism, cosmetic surgery and sexual violence but after visiting Florence, in Italy, she goes back to History, in particularly Italian Renaissance, becoming involved in women's points of view, and exploring what it was like to be a woman in that period. She has become famous for her Italian historical novels which have been translated in more than thirty languages, titled *The Birth of Venus* (2003), *In the company of a Courtesan* (2006) and *Sacred Hearts* (2009). Also by Dunant are the novels: *Blood and Beauty* (2013), *Mapping the edge* (1999), *Transgressions* (1997), *Under my skin* (1995), *Fatlands* (1993), *Birth marks* (1991), *Snow storms in a hot climate* (1988), *Exterminating angels* (1984). As non-fiction works she produced: *The war of the words: the political correctness debate* (1994) as editor, and *The age of anxiety* (1997) as co-editor with Roy Porter. She is a patron of the Orange Prize for women's fiction, works as an editorialist of the Royal Academy magazines and as reviewer for newspapers such as The Times, The

Independent and The Guardian; she also teaches Renaissance Studies at Washington University in St Louis and works for The Faber Academy and Oxford Brooks University. She has two daughters and is currently living in London and Florence.



# **IN THE COMPANY OF THE** **COURTESAN**



## **INTRODUCTION**

*In the Company of the Courtesan* is the story of the Venetian Fiammetta Bianchini, a 21 years-old courtesan and her faithful companion and business partner Bucino Teodoldi, a dwarf. The novel describes their vicissitudes firstly in Rome, where Fiammetta was taken by her mother (a courtesan too) at the age of 16 and then in Venice, where they escape the sack of Rome by German Lutheran soldiers, taking with them only the jewels they had swallowed and a book of Petrarca's sonnets. After proving how violent history was, Fiammetta needs recovering from being almost scalped; Bucino helps her by summoning La Draga, a childhood acquaintance of Fiammetta's, a disabled woman known for her healing arts. Meanwhile, Bucino explores the new reality of the unfamiliar Venice, trying to make some profitable projects: he observes how professional Venetian courtesans work in and outside of a major church. He also recognizes another old acquaintance of Fiammetta's, the sharp writer Pietro Aretino, who fled from Rome because of his scandalous political and religious writings.

Circumstances begin to be lucky for Fiammetta and Bucino. La Draga suggests a treatment, with expensive cosmetics, to improve the faster growing of Fiammetta's hair. Bucino decides to go to a Jewish man to sell

a ruby but, unfortunately, he finds that the real one has been stolen and replaced by a reliable glass copy. Fiammetta wants to try to work from a gondola, hoping that things will turn out to be profitable again to buy a house in the center of the city and to establish a firm household. Bucino tries to sell also the book they own to the Jew, convinced that he can earn a lot of money for the quality of the material the cover is made of, but then he discovers, with much surprise, thanks to the same Jew, that it is not a book of Petrarca's sonnets, but a set of pornographic poems and drawings written by Pietro Aretino. Bucino and Fiammetta decide to blackmail him: under these circumstances, he is forced to provide her first real patron in Venice, and henceforth the courtesan activity is refreshed.

Years of prosperity follow, but some problems threaten the bond between Bucino and Fiammetta: she, a courtesan, fall in love with a seventeen years-old boy, member of the powerful Foscari family, who regularly meets her without paying any money. After a furious argument Bucino goes out of the house and starts walking through Venice when he gets pushed into the canal during a riot, becoming very ill: he will be healed by La Draga and Fiammetta forgives him. In the very last part of the novel Bucino wants to go and see La Draga to thank her and, once in her house, he finds out that she is not a disabled woman, nor blind. He also finds a bag full of little bones that throws into a canal; the bag is found by other people and, as a consequence, La Draga is cruelly accused of witchcraft, and nothing can be done to save her from prison (where Bucino goes and sees her) and death: judged guilty, she is executed and thrown into the *canale dell'Orfano*.

At the very end, the memory of that woman lives in her daughter whose name is Fiammetta too: she needs help, and Bucino and the courtesan will take care of her.

# **UNDERSTANDING THE** **CONTEXT OF *IN THE COMPANY*** **OF THE COURTESAN**

\*

The historical framework of the novel *In the company of the courtesan* is the Sack of Rome, 1527, city in which the scene begins. In addition to the initial historical note before the first part of the book, the author permeates the introductory chapter with elements that give a clear shooting of that historical context: Catholic Church, Protestants, German, French and Spanish soldiers, the protagonists of one of the most important conflicts for supremacy in Europe, but which is mostly considered, in the novel, as a Lutheran crusade against the power of Roman Catholic Church. We find a corrupt Church in a corrupt Rome, once *caput mundi*, challenged by Martin Luther's Protestantism that was quickly spreading from Germany across Europe.

The Papal State was threatened to disappear completely: Pope Clemente VII allied with the French king Francis I, resentful for having signed the treaty of Madrid. With this treaty, France gave up the Italian possessions and returned Bourgogne to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V: the Pope sided with the French emperor because Charles I ruled the whole southern Italy and if he could achieve the northern too, the whole State of Italy would have been unified under a single crown. To prevent this from happening, Clemente VII promoted the anti-imperial

Holy League of Cognac together with Milan, Florence and the Republics of Genoa and Venice.

In response to these intentions Charles V offered alliance to the Pope, trying to control the north of Italy, but to that imperial fair question there was not a kind papal answer: so the Emperor, who had to cope with internal conflicts and the threat from the Ottoman Empire in the oriental part of Italy, not only intervened militarily, but also set the Roman family Colonna, that was always enemy of the Medici family, against the Pope (he was born Giulio de' Medici). Under these circumstances, being the Pope besieged in Rome, he surrendered to Charles V promising to break the Holy League with Francis I and to be faithful to the Emperor. Indeed, the Pope asked for Francis I help, so that Charles V sent his soldiers, called the Lanquenets, against the Papal State. They joined the Spanish soldiers and reached Rome where they fought without a commander. Many palaces were sacked and burned, their owners were brutally killed.

Pope Clemente VII took refuge in Castel Sant'Angelo and decided to pay some money to free Rome from the occupant soldiers, pretending to surrender: he was imprisoned, but before he could pay the total amount of the money as agreed, he managed to escape to Orvieto.

The sack by the Lanquenets lasted a year more or less. It was a really brutal one; among them there was a deep hatred towards the Catholic Church. They were paid every five days, but if the commander did not have enough money to pay them, it was then that the sacking of a city was allowed. That year, the soldiers were without money but also without a leader, because he died during a battle. In this context, the bigger threat was that those men were totally without control; that was the reason why their atrocity in Rome lasted so long in time. It was nothing but destruction and devastation, all carried out with ferocity unmatched

since the barbarian invasions<sup>3</sup>. And Venice? She was totally useless to assist her papal ally. The Lanquenets sacked as much as Rome offered, but escaping the Pope, they definitely lost the money and were killed by a terrible plague and the army lost strength because of desertions. As a consequence, Charles V retired the troops in 1528. Those events forced the Catholic Church to question herself; in 1545 the Pope Paul III Farnese convoked the Council of Trento, considered the first step towards the so called Counterreformation, the Catholic answer to the ninety-five theses nailed to the church door at Wittemberg, in other words, the Lutheran Reformation.

This is a period of a fundamental cultural change that began in Italy but spread all over Europe. It must be added that beside the vulnerability of the central part, where the Pope administered in a loose way, to external countries as were France, Spain and Germany, Italy was, on the contrary, more prosperous in her Northern part which was constituted by the City-State that were among the wealthiest; Venice was the most important window opened to the profitable trades from the East (Byzantine Empire, Arab Lands), where spices, silks and other kind of luxury goods abounded. Venice became peerless on the seas during the Renaissance. This was not only a historic period, but also a cultural movement which brought also ideological development. There are some who think that the end of the Italian Renaissance started with the French invasion in early sixteenth century and then got worse thanks to the conflict among European rulers for the control of Italy. France devastated Northern Italy; it was also the end of the independence of many city-state and, last but not least, the most damaging could be considered just the sack of Rome that definitively marked the end of the Pope's patronage of

---

<sup>3</sup> J. J. Norwich, *A History of Venice*, Penguin Books, 1983, p. 442

Renaissance arts. More, as Bucino foresees in one of his monologues, the end of the Renaissance brought also the decline of the most important European trade route, the Mediterranean one, and the Atlantic Spanish, Portuguese, French and British ports quickly became richer and more powerful than the Italian and, above all, than Venice. The imported products were mostly pepper and cinnamon, but soon the new trade route included other spices and goods that were new to Europe, dooming the economic power of Venice to decay.

# **LITERARY CHOICES IN** **IN THE COMPANY OF THE** **COURTESAN**

\*

*In the company of the courtesan* by Sarah Dunant can be considered as a Historical novel, a fiction plot set in a precise historical period which is generally the past and that reproduces social and cultural features in an approximate realistic way. Historical fiction offers the possibility for using satire and making also social criticism. The characters of this hybrid literary genre are of two types: there are the historical ones who really existed and are true part of History and, on the contrary, the invented ones. Anyway, this kind of characters are likely because they are, in a way, the mirror of the society and culture of the time in which the novel is set. It is a narrative work that offers a wide social reconstruction, recreating the atmospheres, the customs and traditions, the mentality and life in general of the period you want to analyze. It must be added another important detail: the author freezes his or her creative freedom because he or she has to be faithful to the historical truth. As a result, the narrated events are painted in a political framework; Politics and Religion are the backdrop of events, and they coexist necessarily, just as faith and reason. The one is the other essential, but this is just History itself.

The plot is mostly linear. Characters are not many, but it is a book full of events and meanings. The novel is set in Italy during the

Renaissance, in the first half of the sixteenth century, a period of political and religious upheaval; it begins in Rome, but soon it concentrates in another powerful and attractive city: Venice, that soon becomes a character herself and that replaces the coral scenes which usually are peculiar of the historical novel.

It is no coincidence that a writer chooses to set a novel in Venice, a city to be lived with the senses, as the native Venetian Tiziano Scarpa suggests, but in particular with the eye; she is an endless succession of reflections and echoes, a mirroring.<sup>4</sup> And in some way, it is not really true that there is nothing left to discover or describe and that originality of attitude is utterly impossible, as Henry James thought: Venice is a charming architectural setting where the writers give shape to ideas which become fresh inspiration. Even though she has not changed much over time, and might be considered old-fashioned, she always offers new perspectives just as a changeable nervous woman can be to a man, as James rightly said. But this topic will be better discussed later.

The novel consists of three different parts. Very briefly, the first gives the main elements of the plot: the historical context, the characters, the setting in which the story begins (Rome) and the one where the characters escape to and will live until the end of the novel (Venice). In the second part there are many important contents: church, priests, money, prominent figures, social aspects of Venice in general; about the plot, this part describes Fiammetta Bianchini's efforts to achieve a house in Venice, the planning to grant herself a circle of acquaintances to be a respectable courtesan again. The third part shows the harvest after sowing: the courtesan has totally come back and there is much attention to the depth of relationships and to the thoughts of the narrator.

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Mc Carthy, *Venice Observed*, 1963, p.11



The story is narrated by Bucino, the horrible and faithful dwarf, companion and business partner of the courtesan Fiammetta. It is the first time that Dunant writes a novel from a male point of view, exploring the mind of a man. It is a double challenge for her: beside to the first person male perspective, the reader can be surprised by the fact that the story is narrated by a figure that is generally considered as an outsider character, even though Literature has already shown other examples of stories in which outsider characters are given a prominent role: that is the case of Shylock in *The merchant of Venice* (a Jew) and of Othello in the namesake work (a Moor).

Bucino turns out to be a reliable narrator: the reader believes him because he speaks with equal passion and intensity. He is a homodiegetic narrator and also the most complex and complete of all the characters. Except for the last part of the first chapter, in which there is a third person narration that seems to suggest that there is an external narrator who is to announce the real beginning of the story, the reader is always guided only by his voice and his point of view; Bucino investigates his own person, refers to facts relating to himself and can be considered a sort of passe-partout which introduces the psychological disposition of others: he is an inner character, he is part of the plot and is witness of the events that happen around him. In this regard, it is not casual the choice of his name: from the Latin verb *bucinare*, Bucino means someone who gives a signal; as a matter of fact he is a kind of sentry in the novel, always keeping his eyes on the courtesan and constantly announcing, often with irony, the reasons and the good or bad of the circumstances to the reader. However, there are some passages in which Bucino is listening to the voice of an old Venetian man who measures the level of the well in the campo where they live: the man teaches him some history

of Venice, explains how she originated<sup>5</sup>, gives him explanations about weather<sup>6</sup>, has the cruelty of misogynistic judgment<sup>7</sup>.

Fiammetta is another example of Dunant's ability to mix history and fiction: she has the physical aspect of the anonymous woman painted by Titian in his *Venus of Urbino*, but she becomes representative of the heyday of the courtesan, a woman who deeply knows the arts of the bedroom but also of the intellect, a woman who can play skilfully an instrument while caressing her lover to be paid.

There are other characters who are twists of the narrative, characters who are mysterious and unexpected like the secret alleys and hidden passages of Venice and who, in a way, are mirrored by the city herself; the Jewish moneylender to whom Bucino gives the jewels, the Turkish merchant who would like to take the dwarf to the Sultan as a present and last, but not least, La Draga (supposed to be actually living in Venice with the name of Elena Crusichi), the woman who helped to restore Fiammetta once arrived to Venice from Rome, and who is charged with witchcraft.

Dunant herself points out that no amount of research can "turn a fiction writer into a historian", but it is her imaginative ability which brings that research to life, transmuting her knowledge into a vivid, believable portrait of her characters in their historical background. It feels authentic, and in a work of imaginative fiction, that is what counts.<sup>8</sup>

As Arditti wrote in the Daily Mail, the *Courtesan* is an enthralling novel that gives the reader as much intellectual pleasure as Fiammetta does her clients showing her knowledge of music and art in general. One of the most interesting aspects is the way Dunant deals with issues; even

---

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, 2006, p.69

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p.45

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115, 187.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Rounding, review 08/04/2006 in The Guardian.

though the title of the novel induces to think that Fiammetta should be the main character in the book, it is not so, but what is important is her female nonconformity. She is intelligent, very handsome, but there is not romantic love for her, even though she is a prostitute. The young Foscari is never presented by the author as her chance for true love or happiness: this could be what a conventional writer would imagine for a conventional plot, but this is not the case of Dunant, who takes sudden turns. The glamour and seduction of Fiammetta's luxurious life style is quite an established trope, but what makes this novel so compelling is the author's courting with the seedier, darker, visceral and brutal side of prostitution<sup>9</sup>.

What seems to catch the reader's attention is Bucino. Dunant chooses a character who is not in the title of the novel, but is a dwarf, brilliant in his mind but afflicted in his body, to be the narrator, an outsider. He is a mix of theatricality and psychology<sup>10</sup>. He makes accounts of Fiammetta's work, and here comes the demonstration of his sensibility and of his comprehension: he describes her pretending to be happy when she is sad, interested when she is bored, always ready to go to bed even though the only thing she would like to do is sleeping, pretending in front of her clients and paying lovers. This detail gives a certain thickness to the dwarf, out of ordinary people; on the contrary, he proves to be fiercely intelligent, with a big heart and also ambitious. It is not clear which are his real sentiments toward the courtesan; surely they are linked by a strong bond, from the first images in Rome to the rest of their life in Venice.

There can be more interpretations of this kind of bond, but two are the most likely ones. The first one suggests the dwarf to be secretly in love with her mistress; the second, on the contrary, sees his calculating

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://renaissanceissues.wordpress.com>

<sup>10</sup> Kathy Weissman's review 01/01/2011 on [www.bookreporter.com](http://www.bookreporter.com).

ambition. The case is given by the young Vittorio Foscari, the man who frequently goes to Fiammetta's house without any date and to whom she allows to have sexual intercours without paying. Here, Bucino reaction is violent, he would like to kill him, but at the arrival of the courtesan he runs out. It is not clear if this instinct is due to his jealousy or to his fury, because he realizes that his mistress is in love for the first time, and this could be a serious threat for their income. Doubtless, he is very faithful to her, her pimp, often he is her prompter too. They are an unlikely pairing; the details of their relationship are present throughout; they have in common mutual strength and weakness. Maybe the best pages of the *Courtesan* are those dedicated to the dwarf's comments about himself, about his views in the different situations, his thoughts and memories; he is surely an intriguing character, and maybe the most one in the novel.

Even though the title is *In the Company of the Courtesan*, the plot reveals that it should be better *In the Company of the Dwarf*; it is through Bucino's eyes that the reader knows Fiammetta. She is presented in the first chapter as the most beautiful courtesan of that time, a clever and intelligent woman in a house with servants, but her character is, in a way, a superficial description, as the moments in which she dedicates to her dresses, her face, her hair: she takes shape through Bucino's words, and it is only thanks to him that she earns a certain thickness. Surely, it is through the author's sensibility and taste that the reader feels the shame and the horror that Fiammetta faces with the two Protestant women, or that prays for the salvation of both the courtesan and the dwarf when they flee from Rome, or that learns her business arts. In short words, Dunant is able to give emotions and to make the reader live the characters' ones. Her flow has intrigue and suspense enough to keep the reading with pleasure, and the novel is very worth reading, very intelligent and with a

little humor in the right place at the right time. There is also much of suspense and mystery, as the story of La Draga, the apparent disabled and blind woman who actually is normal and has a daughter. Interesting is also the relationship between this woman and the dwarf; at first he is afraid of her, he does not trust in her medicaments, while at the end of the book, he has mixed feelings and then seems to fall in love with her.

The end of the novel maybe is a little bit hurried but it has an unexpected event: La Draga's daughter is in front of Fiammetta and Bucino's house, and she has the same name, that is Fiammetta. This is a mixed blessing to Bucino, who keeps on seeing La Draga in her daughter's eyes and disposition, and the fact that her name is the same of the courtesan, could be the sign of a new and different continuation of their lives, being the courtesan childless.

# **BETWEEN HISTORY AND** **FICTION: IN THE COMPANY OF** **THE COURTESAN**



Being a Historical novel *In the company of the courtesan* has fictional characters born from the author's imagination but other players are real. The Venice depicted in this novel is deeply rooted in research, but some details have been manipulated for the writing of the plot: the Register of the Courtesans, for example, really existed, but Dunant predates its existence by a few years.

## **PIETRO ARETINO**

Most of all, the first to be considered is Pietro Aretino (from Arezzo, the city where he was born), because he plays an important part in this work of fiction, in addition to the fact that he was a man who truly existed in reality; all the other players are his collaborators and friends. Dunant presents him in the seventh chapter, and he is already in Venice. Like the courtesan and her dwarf, he fled from Rome but for the scandals of the mid-1520s. His nickname –given by Ariosto- was the 'scourge of Princes' for his letters and satires did not spare anyone, even though among the

members of the political class or churchmen; he penned both religious work and pornography, and after his death in 1556, the Index of Prohibited books had his one, titled the *Ragionamenti*, high on the list. He was known for his relationships with courtesans: in the *Ragionamenti* he wrote a section dedicated to their training beside to the other pornographic contents of the tract.

Aretino's personality, and so the character, is faithfully built on the details that can be learned from History and on the fantasy of the author. He is the most successful example of historical novel character, a complete mix of reality adapted to invention. It is in St. Mark that Bucino meets Aretino, while watching a troupe of acrobats forming a human pyramid with a dwarf on its top. When Bucino asks him why he is in Venice, the reader learns the first historic notion about his life: Marcantonio Raimondi, an engraver from Bologna, known for being the first important printmaker, was Aretino's friend, together with the Roman painter Giulio Romano. Aretino wrote the *Sonetti Lussuriosi* (Lust Sonnets) to support the disgraced engraver Raimondi, and the painter Romano provided the pornographic drawings. This was the reason why Aretino had to flee Rome temporarily, because the papal censor, Bishop Giberti, hired an assassin to knife him down on the street at night time; he managed to save his life, having his neck and his right hand wounded.

Bucino opens the eighth chapter introducing his personality; the courtesan and he, have much in common. They are both foreigners in Rome (Aretino defines himself a fortunate visitor in Venice, both are from humble origins, they both have an education that allows them to be unafraid of people more powerful than them, and wit enough to understand advantageous situations. Here Dunant uses the character Fiammetta to underline a peculiar aspect of his personality; she is a

courtesan, and makes her fortune with her body, while Aretino is a writer and makes his living by selling his wit. It is just Fiammetta to grasp the essence of his nature, while she warns the dwarf saying: *He has a tongue like a viper. And his pen always goes where the money is*<sup>11</sup>. Beyond the fiction, Aretino had really much in common with the profession of a courtesan.

Aretino had managed to become part of the outer circle of Pope Leo X. At his death, the Cardinal Giuliano de' Medici became his patron: he used Aretino's sharpness to target the scandals towards other people, but when the next Pope was chosen among Giuliano's rivals (Adrian VI), Aretino had to look for a new patron away from Rome, in Mantua. When Giuliano de' Medici became Pope, with the name of Clemente VII, Aretino came back to Rome for a while, but after Bishop Giberti threatened him, he fled Rome to go to Northern Italy searching for a new patron, until he reached permanently Venice, in 1527. His life in 'the seat of all vices' – this was Aretino's idea of Venice-, is shaped by Dunant on facts that have truly happened; even though the fiction element is basic. Aretino had a great satirical talent and used it to strike politicians and also the Pope and all his circle; in the novel, Aretino's satires on the Pasquino statue, which became the symbol of the licentiousness of Rome, are not against the ruling class and the Papal curia, but against Fiammetta, who feels very offended by him. Even though there is not a specific historic reference to the Venetian courtesan Veronica Franco, the quarrel described by Dunant could have been inspired by the one between this courtesan and the poet Maffio Venier<sup>12</sup> who wrote some poems in which she was painfully insulted; Franco wrote some verses in response. This idea seems to be confirmed by Bucino's words which end this first description of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of a courtesan*, Virago, 2006

<sup>12</sup> Alvise Zorzi, *A Venezia nel '500 – il secolo di Tiziano*, Fabbri Editori, 1998, p.187.



relationship between Fiammetta and Aretino: *His behavior was ungentlemanly to say the least, and for a time both parties went out of their way to demean each other whenever they got the chance*<sup>13</sup>.

When the worried dwarf tells his courtesan that also Aretino was in Venice, she seems to be not surprised; on the contrary, she answers with an image that links Aretino to the city, a parallelism or a sort of identification: "Of course he would end up in Venice. We should have guessed. Where else could he go? He's offended most of the rest of Italy by now. And scum always collects on the top of the water"<sup>14</sup>. And Venice *is* water, the water that can collect men like Aretino. He had a house on the Grand Canal, where he used to entertain sometimes the literati, a few of the great merchants, some of the more artistic nobility of this extraordinary city, and he was joined by a number of charming women<sup>15</sup>; little by little, he could be surrounded by a literary circle that cultivated an openly obscene muse that was the opposite of the Petrarch's ideal. In Venice, Aretino tried to refresh his activity but, surely, his life here was harder than in Rome, where he self-proclaimed public figure, vomiting out his views to any who would pay for them. Here he was a more private citizen, and made no political satire to give a more honest image of the city. In Venice, his pen was differently oriented: he must find other patrons *to flatter and fawn over*<sup>16</sup>, because he had many enemies all over Italy at that time. He praised Venice comparing her to an earthly paradise, rich in liberty, prosperity and piety. It is interesting Bucino's irony when he says: *Personally, I liked him better as a lion than a house cat*, a paragon that, in this case, fiction uses to better explain reality; from being an

---

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of a courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 138

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

invulnerable Roman lion, he turned out to be a gentle, purring Venetian cat.

## **JACOPO SANSOVINO**

From Bucino's words the reader comes to know also that Aretino was cunning enough to nuzzle close to those artistic and political figures to achieve his purpose of rebirth: among these people was the Florentine architect and sculptor Jacopo Sansovino, author of Venice's most beautiful High Renaissance buildings; in the novel he is employed to stop the St. Mark's domes from falling down at the time of Aretino's arrival, but it seems, instead, that he was only at the beginning of his most famous and important commissions in central Venice, such as the Zecca, the Loggetta, the sculptures next to the Bell Tower and statues and reliefs in the Basilica. This because he, too, was in Rome at the time of the sack, and like Aretino he left for Venice in the same year. Anyway, the historic element useful to Dunant's novel, is the fact that Sansovino managed to become chief architect and also *Protomaestro* (superintendent) to St. Mark's Procurators, and was such an influential artist that he had an apartment in St. Mark's square, so that Aretino could afford to wait for the right patron among the acquaintances of the architect.

## **TIZIANO VECELLIO**

*But what made their hands tremble was the way those fierce green eyes looked directly into theirs...when she was naked she could cloak herself in her hair alone<sup>17</sup>*

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 88.

Among the references to the historical context of Renaissance Italy, Dunant inserts also artistic elements. The women painted in the Renaissance are often courtesans and the inspiration for the character of Fiammetta came to the author by having seen the famous painting which is in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, called *The Venus of Urbino*, by the Venetian painter Titian. In 1530, He had an incredible growing career because of the great number of high rank clients, but above all thanks to his friend Pietro Aretino who promoted him largely: he publicized the artist's portraits and this came to be really profitable. When Titian ended a portrait, Aretino praised it by writing a letter or a poem to the client it was commissioned by. Then, this letter or poem had to be published, so that he could keep in touch with high rank clients, increasing the number of potential supporters. Their friendly relationship and artistic collaboration are underlined by Dunant through Bucino who remembers a private context, in Titian's house; he refers to the smells from the kitchen, where Titian and Aretino used to eat lovely food.

The *Venus of Urbino* is the most famous painting of those years. It is a different version of another work of art painted by Giorgione together with Titian, more or less twenty years earlier. In the twentieth chapter the setting is Titian's studio, in his house. Here, reality is told through fiction: Bucino is asked to give an opinion on a painting that Titian is going to finish. The description of it is faithfully shaped by the real painting by Titian; in the background there is part of the window, on the walls there are tapestries, in front there are two decorated chests by which two maids, one kneeling and the other standing nearby, are sorting clothes. The woman is a very luscious, a beautiful young one, lying on a couch, holding her eyes at the person watching her, with a small dog snoozing at her feet and her left hand hiding her sex. Her look shows an open

minded woman: it could be interpreted as a sensual invitation, a vague exhortation to married love and procreation which, according to the popular belief of those years, could be influenced by the contemplation of Beauty.

The look of the Venus painted by Titian is a remarkable detail, quite a revolutionary one in this moment of History of Art: there are many paintings and pictures of naked Venus, but those women are always pretending to be modest, looking almost shy, while this in particular looks at the one who is watching and painting her. In the novel, indeed, Bucino observes that: *There is not one iota of shame, embarrassment, or coyness in her face... however long you stare at her, she keeps on staring back*<sup>18</sup>. The more Dunant researched, the more she realized that the Venus of Urbino was certainly a Venetian courtesan, because of her attitude and because the painter Titian knew a certain number of courtesans. This may be the reason why, in her novel, she makes Fiammetta the woman painted by Titian, that is to say that she is the *Venus of Urbino*, a courtesan who validates this hypothesis: *What is different in this painting, though, is her face. For while every Venus I have ever seen is asleep, or gazing out into the distance, modestly ignorant of the fact that she is been observed, this Venus, my lady's Venus, is awake. And not simply awake but staring directly out at the viewer*<sup>19</sup>. More, when Bucino is also asked to guess what the painted woman is thinking about, his answer –after telling Titian that what he sees in the painting is a beautiful courtesan as if she was lying before him- is another comment that confirms Dunant's idea of Venus, a woman who is thinking whatever wants her to be thinking; this is proper of a courtesan.

---

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p. 244.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 243.

It is just in the twentieth chapter of the novel that Dunant better introduces the painter Titian, writing the essential details useful to describe him: he had a house and a studio to the north across the Grand Canal near Rio di Santa Caterina, he was *far and away Venice's most celebrated artist, so famous now that the paint is barely dry on his canvases before they are crated off on boats and mule trains to the courts of half of Europe*<sup>20</sup>. In addition to this, there was another thing that Titian had in common with Aretino, and it was fondness for women. Aretino established cordial relationships with courtesans, and generally painters could find some who sat free for them; it began to spread the portraiture in which also ladies are models, in addition to the flourishing of the secular painting, of mythological subjects and scenes of the loves of gods and goddesses, which were occasions to introduce female nudity in paintings.

Aretino, Sansovino and Titian dominated Venetian arts of the first half of the Sixteenth century.

## **COURTESANS**

In sixteenth-century Venice courtesans were not only celebrated and honored, but often people of cultivation, with a taste for art and poetry<sup>21</sup>. These young models were in a moment in their lives in which they were most successful and earned the most amount of money; they started at the early age of fifteen or sixteen, they were painfully young. They found a position in society by selling their virginity, a shocking

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 236.

<sup>21</sup> Jan Morris, *Venice*, 1960, Faber and Faber, p.47

condition for us but not at that time, because women used to get married at the age of fifteen during that period of time. Going deeper, they probably had very little sense of what they yet were, in terms of their own personality.

The courtesans elevated prostitution to an higher level. Being Venice such a cosmopolitan city, and considered the most successful commercial city in Christendom, where foreigners were continuously going and coming, they were tolerated as well as other minorities of people like Jews, Turks, Germans and others. Venice traded oriental spices, salt, cloths, with merchants and business men, but the great number of relics was also very attractive for pilgrims and tourists; it is in this context that prostitution spread, where supply and demand were powerfully tuned. As the saying goes, wherever there is public virtue, there is always private vice: *My mother always told me that visiting merchants love the romance of them.*<sup>22</sup>

Venetian courtesans were very famous, increased in wealth and respectability; it is for them that, once out of the confines of the brothels, Venice acquired her lasting reputation for lascivious charm. In the sixteenth century they were not only celebrated and honored, but were often people of cultivation with taste for poetry, art and also music. Generally, they had humble origins. They did not stop only to sex practice, often selling their virginity, but also sold conversation, company, elegance; they were not simple prostitutes, they were courtesans, whose customers were generally rich, noblemen, and also corrupted churchmen. They lived in a neighborhood called *Castelletto*, famous throughout Europe for their beauty and their skills and also in the *Rio terà delle Carampane* (a nickname that stands for 'old prostitutes'), an area that

---

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p. 155.

reached to the *Ponte delle tette*, a bridge on which courtesans faced with their naked breasts or sit wearing skirts, turning out to be an attraction for men. Going beyond tolerance, it must be said that their activity was encouraged because homosexuality was widely spreading at that time, as Bucino explains in the novel: *the state is in raising panic over the numbers of young men to be found in dark alleyways pleasing one another rather than sinning in the way God intended*<sup>23</sup>. Although there were hardest and repressive laws against homosexuals, they were judged guilty for practicing sodomy and publicly hanged between the two columns in the *piazzetta*, where their bodies were burned. But sodomy was practiced also by heterosexuals, as Dunant wrote in her *Courtesan*; Fiammetta's first client was a French ambassador, a man with hidden homosexual instincts. She had to wear male clothing and to practice sodomy, considered a worthy talent for a successful courtesan.

As for all the other groups of people (Jews, Turks, and foreigners in general), there were rules also for courtesans: their behavior and activity were directly controlled by the Republic. Their day started with the tolling of the *Marangona* bell, they could not take part to festivities but the *Sensa* in St. Alvisè, which became the *corso* of the courtesan (a 'bridge' made of boats). In the twenty-eight chapter of the novel, Bucino refers to this kind of custom; Fiammetta takes part of the procession: *our black Crow, Loredan, has done penance for his endless pomposity by securing my lady a place on one of the barges that follow the procession, a privilege of such magnitude that the whole house is now awash in dresses and dressmakers*<sup>24</sup>. At night, they had to go home after the *Marangona* tolled three times or they were punished with ten lashes; they risked five more if

---

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of a courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p.73-74.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p.304.

they appreciated men at Christmas and Easter time and in other holy days.

There were two categories of courtesans. *Cortigiane di lume* or Low-ranking courtesans, lived in unhealthy houses which were frequented by low social men, and usually wore shirts, trousers, generally poor-quality clothes. On the contrary, *Cortigiane oneste* or high-ranking courtesans, were intellectual women who usually had long and blond hair, their manicured hands wore jewels, they wore high shoes and showed off the most elegant dresses. Their houses were full of the most ostentatious wealth such as agate vases, silver plates, majolica dishes, gilded crystal Murano glasses, precious tapestries, the best linens, embroidered silk, musical instruments. The courtesan was responsible for organizing her house; she gave orders to her servants and was generally loved as much as she was feared. She instructed them to lay the table, gave orders to the cook about how to prepare a banquet for the arrival of the client.

But who were the people who engaged the courtesans? They were often the women who worked next to the house where the same courtesans lived, housekeepers, but also boatmen, porters, craftsmen. There were also sisters and mothers, as in the case of Fiammetta; she was brought to Rome at the age of sixteen by her mother (who was a courtesan too), a city that was considered the natural home for courtesans, because such was the appetite for beauty that any witty girl could easily achieve some fortune, in a city full of corrupted clerics. Fiammetta's mother procured many offers for her virginity and among the men she chose, she found a cardinal in the pope's circle who looked for pleasure for his mind as well as for his body. Courtesans as Fiammetta were often envied because of the high-level of acquaintances they could have; it was a way to lead a comfortable life and a way to have protection



and favoritism granted by people who had some power and influence in society.

There was a register called the *Catalogo de tutte le principal et più honorate cortigiane di Venetia*, in which there were written the names, addresses, and fees of Venice's most prominent prostitutes. It was particularly useful to foreigners. A very famous Venetian courtesan was Veronica Franco. She was probably the most celebrated member of the high-ranking courtesans, a woman who had fine education and considerable literary and artistic talents. Being a well-educated woman, she wrote two volumes of poetry titled *Terze rime* and *Lettere familiari a diversi*, published books of letters and collected the works of other important writers into anthologies and thanks to her literary success she established a refuge for prostitutes and their children at St. Maria del Soccorso; she is thought to have a startlingly modern feminist sensibility<sup>25</sup>. There are similarities between Veronica Franco's life and Fiammetta's; the former's mother was listed as the person to whom the fee should be paid. This means that behind Franco's talents there was her mother managing potential clients and precious contexts, just as for Fiammetta.

## **GIULIO ROMANO**

The Roman painter Giulio Romano was an important figure in the world of the history of art; he was the promoter of the change from High Renaissance Classicism to the new style called Mannerism, and together with the engraver Marco Raimondi, he made Italian art spread throughout

---

<sup>25</sup> Judith Martin, *No Vulgar Hotel*, Norton, 2007, p. 166.

Europe. In the novel, Bucino defines Raimondi the firmest hand in Rome and Romano the best drawer, undoubtedly. In the fourteenth chapter, the dwarf makes some references to the Roman art in the richest houses or even in the most important palaces –Palazzo Chigi, for example–, underlining that artistic lust existed also before Romano's work. Flashy nymphs chased by satyrs, the same satyrs in a state of sexual excitement, falsely chaste, modest naked Venuses were an unquestionable appetite for sex and a more modern approach to this side of the art, but the subject matter was mostly classical, with echoes of mythology, parameters accessible only to people who had cultural and educated taste.

With Romano's drawings in the work *I modi*, classical became only allusions such as pillars or flowing draperies: it came the modern element in the way to conceive the human body, and Dunant gives the idea, explicitly: *Figures with physiques of god and goddesses and the imaginations of whores, the men strutting and rippling, the women with an abundance of soft, open flesh. And all of them enamoured, enslaved by lust*<sup>26</sup>.

Not surprisingly, Clement VII was one of his biggest patrons; he was born Giuliano de' Medici, a noble lineage of the erotic: his uncle Lorenzo, for example, wrote the *Canzona de' visi addietro*<sup>27</sup>, in which there are clear references to sodomy within marriage, practice that prevents pregnancies and makes only generate lust. Even though the Pope and his Curia were attracted by the stimulation of art and Roman Church was very corrupted, he could not let these kind of engravings circulating among the highest members and through the Roman society at a pretty price, because Germany was in the grip of rebellion and

---

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p. 168

<sup>27</sup> Lorenzo De' Medici, *Opere*, Laterza, 1939, vol. 2 p. 254.

heresy and there was a great production of images of Rome showing the *Holy Father as the Antichrist and the Devil's whore presiding over the city of Sodom*<sup>28</sup>: those engravings could add more propaganda to the German rivals. This was the reason why Romano, fearing Cardinal Giberti's punishment for his scandalous drawings commented by Aretino's *Sonetti Lussuriosi* (Aretino had composed each sonnet as a conversation between each couple, a dialogue of lust for every position<sup>29</sup>), took shelter in Mantua, while Raimondi was sent to prison.

## **FRANCESCO PETRARCA**

Born in the city of Arezzo in Tuscany like Aretino, Petrarch (latinized as Petrarca and anglicized as Petrarch) is considered the father of Humanism, a key figure of the Renaissance, a very important poet who largely influenced philosophy, too. His sonnets were translated into English by Thomas Wyatt, and this kind of writing poetry was employed also in England from that time on. In some of his letters, Petrarch expresses his love for Venice where he had a house on the Riva degli Schiavoni, on the site of the present numbers 4143-4<sup>30</sup>, provided by the city in exchange of the promise to leave his library to the republic when he died.

Petrarch was a really important figure because he renewed the sense of scholarship, questioning on the same reality and God. According to him, Man can take decisions for himself because of his rationality;

---

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p. 169.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 170.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Garrett, *Venice, a cultural and literary companion*, Interlink Books, 2001, p.85.

more, he believed that human nature is basically good, concept that was in contrast with the pessimistic Christian view that saw Man as a sinner needing redemption. Love is man's glory, and glory could go beyond the passing of time, reaching eternity; according to Christian ideology eternity could be reached only by faith. Love is a strongly desired feeling, but at the same time it is painful and causes instability.

It is in the first chapter that Dunant mentions Petrarch, but he is not one of the character. After wishing good luck to Ascanio (Marcantonio Raimondi's assistant) and once back into the kitchen, Bucino notices something on the floor under the table, which he immediately thought that was fallen from beneath his jacket while getting up to leave. It was a small, scarlet and leather-bound book and few lines after, the reader comes to know that the book is a collection of Petrarch's sonnets, with gold letters, silver corners and an elaborate silver barrel lock with a combination of numbers. In the twelfth chapter Fiammetta and the dwarf are talking about their problems about their economic situation, about the fact that the book, *the stuff of a scholar's library and the kind of object that would have made any printer's reputation in a new city*<sup>31</sup>, could be sold to the Jew known by Bucino to achieve some money to buy a gondola, where she could start to work again.

In the thirteenth chapter Bucino goes to the pawnbroker's house in the ghetto. There is a brief dialogue in which the two talk about Petrarch. It is a clever strategy to hide a scandalous content –that of the *I Modi*– under the immaculate cover probably of the *Canzoniere* -366 poems where the largest part is in sonnet form- by Petrarch, two works where love is the common subject, but from two very different perspectives. Despite of the *I Modi*, the sonnets are a praise for a woman, Laura, with

---

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p. 26.

whom Petrarch maybe had not any personal contact, in which there is the will of exclaiming love more than persuading to love. The woman to whom they are dedicated to is fair-haired, very lovely to look at, a very modest wife; she is the very opposite of the women depicted in the drawings by Romano, and those described by Aretino. The book found by the dwarf could be considered as the metaphorical representation of Fiammetta: *She stood tall...and she was beautiful...Her skin was smooth and pale as alabaster... the perfect modest seduction in a city...to pretend virtue*<sup>32</sup>; on the surface, a beautiful woman who pretends to be virtuous, but indeed, she hides her private vice being a courtesan, just as Ascanio's book, covered by an unsuspected title but filled with prohibitive contents for that time, where none of the sixteen positions drawn by Romano was allowed by Catholic Church, safe from Cardinal Giberti's inquisition.

## **ASHER MESHULLAM**

He was a Jew, born in Lunel in the second half of the twelfth century. Little is known about him; he was the son of the leader of the Jewish community and at a certain point of his life, he decided to convert to Christian faith. Dunant explicitly declares that she discovered very little about him, and even though she created the Jewish character Chaim Colon who converted himself to Christianity, changing also his name into Lelio da Modena, inspired by him, she decided to write about a different experience of life.

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

From the initial description of Chaim Colon, where Bucino gives the portrait of a man with dangling curls wearing a cap, with dark eyes and a long beard, the dwarf gives a totally different one; Lelio da Modena has no more his curls, nor his cap, and his chin looks freshly shaved; he declares he left the ghetto three years earlier and that he is converted, becoming a baptized Christian. A pawnbroker, he turns into a merchant who travels by ship to the Indies, going to discover marketplaces such as Damascus and Aleppo.

# **VENICE AND** **IN THE COMPANY OF THE** **COURTESAN**



*'So where?'. We both knew the answer, of course. With war wiping its bloody fingers all over the land, there was only one place to go. To a city of wealth and stability ruled by men who had the money and manners to pay for what soldiers take at the end of bayonets. An independent state with an eye for beauty and a talent for trade, where clever exiles with enough imagination could make their fortunes. There are some who think it the greatest place on earth, the most prosperous and the most peaceful<sup>33</sup>*

*In the company of the courtesan* is a novel with few characters, but that has a special one: Venice, the setting itself, a city that takes part to the characters' events and that gives significance, through metaphors and symbolism, to the author's design. Venice could be considered herself part of a literary genre, because she is a city with a thousand faces: praised for being such a complex one, extreme in her totality: golden but shadowy, where beauty and hope of life, passion and art coexist with

---

<sup>33</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p. 38.

some sense of loss, desperation and decaying. Venice appears as a watery city: it might seem a contradiction, but it is a undeniable reality, in which history and art, past and present stratified themselves; that is the case of Dunant, who wrote a work of fiction set in Renaissance Italy which has some aspects of life that can be considered as current.

*The entry into Venice...is a trope of Literature. Arriving is a significant process, and entry into this strange tropic, like a ritual of initiation, demands remark*<sup>34</sup>. At the end of the first chapter, after Fiammetta and Bucino's escape from Rome, there is the description of their arrival to Venice. This moment is considerable in the imagery level, generally because the impact of the main characters is very impressive and also because the atmosphere of the place usually mirrors the characters' disposition. The courtesan and the dwarf reach Venice by rowing boat from the mainland, at night. Leaving behind Rome, the city victim of a tremendous sack and pillage, after an arduous journey, the night is the best curtain to inaugurate the show. Night carries darkness, and darkness means disorientation, awe, the unknown. *I'd never wanted to go there*<sup>35</sup> Bucino thinks to himself, when he is talking to Fiammetta about their future destination; he is afraid of water, and these words seem to presage a failure even though he knows that they are going to arrive to a city known also for tales of magic and wonder. From the start, the reader realizes that Venice is not only a setting but also a personification, a kind of wrapped-in-mystery woman who is silently commenting on events and who is constantly changing her dress to enlighten the characters' attitude. Leaving the mainland, they lose all that was certain to them, so far. They are welcomed by a *black and choppy*<sup>36</sup> water which

---

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, Penn, 2007, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, 2006, p. 38

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39



envelopes them in darkness; but, suddenly, a sign of hope comes: a glow of flickering lightning on the horizon ahead. In this first scene there are aspects of the city, both the sides of the same medal; the black, deadly one, in which the characters seem to have no hope (*the first buildings took shape, hovering on the water like lines of pale tombstone*<sup>37</sup>) and the white glowing one: from a situation of discontent, difficulty, penance and darkness Venice will become a place where they find the way to redeem their troubled life (*the boatman steered the craft to the left, and now the vista began to change*<sup>38</sup>).

Venice is Fiammetta's homeland. The gondolier brings her to her mother's house, in Cannaregio, and here there is a mournful surprise: her mother had passed away. Here there is a general collapse. Fiammetta wants to go home in Venice to take shelter, but her mother (*generally, the mother is the most important figure in life, the shelter in stormy events, dispenser of impartial advice*) is already dead; the city where she has grown up is her mother's grave now, and this causes psychological collapse to her. Outside, Venice looks like a mortuary cell: ghostly palaces in which the inner light is waxy and pale, canals are narrow as fingers and black as Hell. The smell is rot with the sharp tang of urine and the only perfume is that of poverty. There is only the hollow sound of the slip-slap of the water. *In the gloom it was impossible now to see either of the women's eyes*<sup>39</sup>: a watery, dark, silent and sinister setting.

From the point of view of the plot of the novel, being the city a sort of choral character, the Venice they were going to see in 1527 could not be as at her heyday or appear as confident. Once more, it is Bucino's perspective that is the most impressive: being a dwarf, his posture is

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 39

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 39

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 43

naturally stretched towards the ground, and his nostrils are the closer to it and the first also to speak. *This city stinks, crumbling houses rise out of rank water.. families live stacked one on top of another like rotting vegetables*<sup>40</sup>. There is a double decay: it seems to be the most important detail for Bucino, while he looks at the city, and it seems to be the only disposition Fiammetta can have; the fact is they both find hard to breathe. Worse, at that time, there were many refugees escaping from the war, who travelled, taking with them also the plague; but Venice had a way to stem the danger: officers were sent to every merchant ship looking for infected people who were brought to an outer island.

In this oppressive atmosphere, Venice offers to Bucino a different point of view from which evaluate their condition: *gossip travels faster than smell here*<sup>41</sup> and the old man's gossip (he was the one who measured the level of the well in their *campo*) becomes a guide through the history and the life of the city. According to him, the number of prostitutes was increasing considerably, and this encourages Bucino's self-confidence: now Fiammetta lays upon her mother's bed like a dead woman, but he will be able to have his Lady recovered and she will be a profitable courtesan again, in a moment in which there is room only for blasphemy, ridicule and sin. *The city ... would surely make our fortune*<sup>42</sup>, says Bucino. They both go to Venice to take shelter in a city that was founded as a place of refuge herself. History teaches that people coming from the mainland, from Aquileia and Altinum, had been besieged first by Alaric's Visigots and then by Attila's Huns.

The dwarf compares Venice to a labyrinth, but it is not really a simple image, because it turns out to be her true shape at practical level.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 45

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 46

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 46

Dunant seems to communicate that the setting of the novel fits well the characters' life: in a labyrinth a person is forced to rediscover self-confidence and to find a way to control his own destiny. In this labyrinth Bucino and Fiammetta have to reinvent themselves, but the way to find the key is not easy; through its narrow *calli*, the sense of claustrophobia is confusing and disheartening, but they will be able to find their Ariadne's thread. The image of the labyrinth is often recurrent in Literature; just think of Henry James, who set *The Aspern Papers* in Venice, where Mr. Brooke is used to walk in the city alone, a habit that Tanner describes as *a dangerous errancy in the labyrinthine interior of the old seductress, the city, a city that has lost its 'maidenhood' and, always, invites penetration*<sup>43</sup>.

Venice decaying, Venice stinking, they are almost dead in an almost dead city; Meragosa, the wicked, malicious and liar and La Draga, the blind deformed by scoliosis, are two women with negative characteristics in a negative city but who are fundamental for their recovering. These women are the first sign that in Venice they can find the way to stand up again and think that nothing is definitely lost; the unctions and pastes made by La Draga smell rancid but they will be useful to make them breathe again.

The beginning of the second part has a central role in the novel. The author describes every detail with great accuracy, painting an active Venetian community. As Fiammetta is completely recovering, Bucino comes to know the city gradually; there is a picturesque description of ships arriving from the Levant, and he starts to feel inspired by the activism all around him: it is as if Venice was waking up his sleepy skills and this context of active and profiting business makes him smell

---

<sup>43</sup> Tony Tanner, *Venice desired*, 1992, p.163-164.

opportunity in the air, the same air that at the end of the first part was defined as heavy and *sour*. Dunant takes the opportunity to make a comparison between Rome and Venice through Bucino's words; while the first has a dangerously corrupted church and the profits are squandered by the power of a single family, the second has very efficient organization. Being Bucino a cripple himself, here he comes to be aware of the fact that in Venice all is trade and all is profitable business: even the cripples have agility enough to earn daily, so that he foretastes the chance of becoming rich, fancying at the mere sight of them. Bucino and Fiammetta leave a city where sins were apparently forgiven and absolved, where hypocrisy ruled; in Venice, sins are also a way to make profit. Gluttony, vanity, envy and avarice are a useful umbrella to keep dancing in the rain of business.

Bucino confesses he do not like Venice; even though Rome was corrupted and hypocrite, she was a magnet for clever and ambitious men and he miss the kind of life they had in their Roman house, where talented writers created an exciting context. Fiammetta, on the contrary, appreciates her homeland; her words try to make Bucino understand the beauty of Venice, promoting a change of perspective: it is a city to be appreciated only if understood. When the eye makes the picture whole, the detail cannot be noticed; but here, the detail makes the difference. He fears the water, and she makes him to understand that he can not keep thinking this way, simply because Venice *is* just water; it is not only something to be afraid of, but something that makes her unique: houses reflect into canals, perfectly as if they were a mirror. In Rome, Fiammetta felt as if she was buried alive, because she was deprived of her home, her girlhood and fancies. Once back to Venice, she feels alive again, and the shimmering, the gentle breeze, the idea of fragility of the glass, give her the idea that their destiny, just like the city, is not so solid as it

seemed to be up to now. She likes the Venetian lagoon, maybe because water fits anywhere, and has the power of finding a way out, always: this is another key point of the symbolic imagery that lies underneath the choice of this setting.

By daylight Venice looks like a world of industrious ants in which Bucino gets used to walk in the narrow *fondamenta*, with sure feet which do not fear of falling into canals; but it is at night that she sends shivers into his soul. Here the author shows the double identity of Venice: from the quiet shimmering lagoon during the day, she shifts closer to nightmare after sunset for the dwarf. In the nights in which there is no moon, with few lamps, it is difficult for him to distinguish black water from black stone; even the sounds moves differently, the voice of the water comes louder on all sides and his heartbeats increases. All these sensations interfere with his sense of direction, and the panic makes him run like a rat. But Dunant shows also the other side of the coin: Venice is always attractive, also at nighttime. People come to the Piazza and Bucino realizes that the power of the Venetian empire is still a wonder for all who stare at it. *It feels as if the whole city has let down its hair and is showing off to the crowd*<sup>44</sup>. Venice is very proud. Tapestries, banners, nobility, women who always dress in a very pompous way, a great wharf filled with long ships with many hanging lamps which light up the very sea, flags of the great lion of St. mark waving everywhere, troupes of acrobats making their show; also this is Venice, a city almost anthropomorphized: she seems a beautiful, proud woman who pleasantly shows off to the world at night, a moment so intimate, known and appreciated for her sense of order and with a need for release.

---

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, 2006, p. 102

“Venice”: title. “Order and law”: subtitle. During the Renaissance there was as much cruelty as in the Middle Ages in Europe, and Venice is not an exception at that time. Who was responsible for any transgression of the law had to be punished with the most atrocious suffering: there were different kinds of punishment, depending on the type of offense. At the end of the ninth chapter, Bucino is going back home from the Ghetto, where he discovers that the ruby he wanted to sell is a fake because it is made of glass. He is very nervous and feel his legs aching, but he decides to go on, regardless; he takes a wrong bridge and then an unknown alley until he finds himself at the edge of the Rialto, where he can assist to one of the examples of Venetian Justice. A thief is desperately running away from two fishermen, with the fear in his face, but soon he is hauled up and sent before the magistrate: the next day he has his skin off his back and his thieving hand hanging from his neck. The so called *Cappe Nere* were six magistrates (one for each *sestiere*) who had their office in the Ducal Palace, just over the prisons. They worked at nighttime, patrolling the city with their agents, looking for thieves, people who kept arms without permission and murders. When they captured criminals, they sent them to prison and then they interrogated and tortured them, if necessary. Gamblers, blasphemers and slaves were condemned to double punishment: they were sent to prison but also had to pay some money. At that time, blasphemy was considered a very dangerous crime because people greatly feared the consequences of God’s wrath. In the novel, it is Aretino who explains to Bucino some aspects of the Venetian legal system, just when La Draga has been charged of witchcraft and sentenced to death by Venetian magistrates: *Venice is far too comfortable to need to fear heresy, especially because the Lutherans show such a talent for trade. But for that very reason, the*

*city must also still be seen to be pure in its faith. Hence this latest decree against blasphemy and curses, which we all know is as much about their nervousness over vice as it is about the promotion of the true faith*<sup>45</sup>.

If gamblers were heard swearing while gambling they were put in a barge, forced to wear a crown painted with devils, while their guilty was shouted and they had their tongue cut, their eyes wrested and their right hand cut. Other criminals had their tongue put in a chock and entrapped into a cage that hung from one of the sides of the Bell Tower of St. Mark; then they were sent to prisons for ten years, where they were fed only with bread and water. First of all, thieves were lashed and stamped with fire, murderers were hung up, those who killed people with spells were burned. Venetian Justice was very steady with people guilty of political offenses and above all, with traitors. History teaches that where there are good laws and exemplary punishments, the law is followed by the order in a Country. Obviously, punishments should not be cruel as in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, but they should be exemplary; nowadays, Italian politics seems to suffer from a considerable lack of exemplarity and, as a consequence, of order. These reflections are the evidence of the fact that contemporary society can not exist without the past; when a novel as *In the company of the courtesan* is read, and one goes back and thinks about what it was like to live in Renaissance Italy, it takes a little bit to realize that there are parallels to our life, because History is the present as well, one can not exclude the other.

*My God, one day Venice will be beautiful and I will be ready to appreciate it. But not today.*<sup>46</sup> These words suggest that Venice is a sort of Purgatory; it seems that Bucino knows that there will be a Paradise and also that it will be just in Venice. Or, better, that *it will be Venice*. The

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p.364.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 144

Paradise has to be intended as a change in his and Fiammetta's life, when they will reach a wealthy condition, a prosperous household, but before they had to face all the difficulties and the problems represented by the city herself, in particular for Bucino: her bare physical and watery constitution (it is his greatest fear, for he can not swim), her weather, the people. When he realizes that the ruby is only a piece of glass, he blames Meragosa for this and looks for her all around Venice for three days. When he comes back and talks to Fiammetta, he is at the window and throws the broken shutters open, looking down at that frightful water with its flashes of sunlight. Suddenly, he feels back in the wood outside Rome, in which there was a river and he held what he thought that was an authentic ruby and that he hoped it would have been their fortune; in that place, he remembered of the promise of future planned between he and the courtesan, but now, in Venice, the water is no longer benevolent and his anger falls into a curse: *God damn this poxy city. I never wanted to come here anyway*<sup>47</sup>, and hopes fall down rapidly.

One of the first step towards a benevolent fortune is the way Fiammetta thinks to resume her activity, starting from something which is considered to have some sinister connotation: the gondola, a boat so adapted to the nature of the city that it is unlikely to imagine Venice without it, it is indissociably associated with the city. *Those aren't street whores on those boats. They are special to Venice. My mother always told me that visiting merchants love the romance of them. Only here could a man have such an encounter. And for that reason the best women can charge accordingly. As long as their boats are fancy enough*<sup>48</sup>; thanks to Fiammetta's words it is easy to understand that gondolas were used also by prostitutes. The gondola is one of the most famous symbols of Venice,

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 148.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 155.



constructed of several different woods, a very strong and fast kind of boat but there is one detail that matters most: its blackness. At Fiammetta's time, the gondola had a little black cabin that intensified its air of suggestive gloom; gondolas have been black just since the sixteenth century when the laws ordained it, with generally standard measurements. Double is the idea that hides behind the image of the gondola; most people think about romance, while others associate it to something funereal, just a synecdoche of Venice herself. At its prow there is a steel device which nobody really knows what it stands for, but among the various versions of what it represents, someone believes that it is a symbol of a key that were fixed on Egyptian funerary boats. Judith Martin wrote<sup>49</sup> that narrow black gondolas look like hearses or coffins and the gondolier is compared to Charon who, for little money, rows the dead from one side of the canal to the other; but before her, Literature gave many examples referring to the image of the coffins: Goethe, Gautier, Wagner, Mann. Byron encloses three ideas about a gondola and Venice; a gondola is *black* (blackness reminds of death) *like a coffin kept in a canoe where none can make out what you say or do* (this shows the general impenetrability of the city and of death itself), *and up and down the long canals they go*<sup>50</sup>. As Tanner suggests, these last words could be associated to a phallic element: Venice and the gondola *look like death and yet may be enabling vehicles of the compulsive sexual activity their very movement seems to imitate*<sup>51</sup>. This better explains why visiting merchants love the romance of those boats.

The weather is the resource that Venice uses most to participate to the events described in the narration. One of the most characteristic,

---

<sup>49</sup> Judith Martin, *No vulgar hotel*, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Lord Byron, "Beppo", XIX-XX

<sup>51</sup> Tony Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 1992, p.49.

among atmospheric conditions, is the presence of the fog. There are many writers who, impressed by the effects of the fog, quoted it in their works; Byron, too, wrote about the Venetian weather, and this is the comparison he chose to describe a foggy day: *.. not through a misty morning twinkling weak as a drunken man's dead eye in maudlin sorrow*<sup>52</sup>. Generally, when a character is going to face a difficult situation or is in a bad mood, the weather of the city suddenly changes, getting worse, and making the context more obscure and difficult. It is the case of Bucino who, coming back from the Ghetto, gets enveloped in a fog that is getting thicker and thicker, a fog that pushes everywhere, through the alleys, over the water, against the stone of the buildings. He is impressed by the fact that streets seem to fall away behind him, and that all the visible get lost within seconds, being the fog so dense: he can barely see the ground under his feet. This kind of atmosphere is almost frightening, a confusing and disorienting landscape he is not used to, where also people have a frightful connotation: he compares them to ghosts for the way they move, for their voice which seems to be even disconnected from their bodies. *I've heard about Venice's fog from my old man at the well, dark stories of how the mist descends as thick as doubt, so that men can no longer tell where the land ends and the water begins... he says, you can find one or two fellows with bad consciences floating face down in a canal barely a hundred yards from their homes*<sup>53</sup>. This kind of weather causes him anxiety, and in the fog: *The temperature has dropped with the weather, and I walk as fast as I can to keep my spirits and my blood up. It is like moving through a blanket now, and I can feel the anxiety gnawing at me*<sup>54</sup>.

---

<sup>52</sup> Lord Byron, "Beppo", XLIII.

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, 2006, p. 161.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.

Venice is not only an enemy; she can be also a friendly place. *Only God's natural ingredients –space, sunlight, and stone. With a little help from the ingenuity of man. Venice, my friend. Heaven on Earth. How did we ever live anywhere else?*<sup>55</sup>. It could be considered as one of the most heartfelt comment on the city, and this time are not Bucino's words but Aretino's. This vision of Venice is shared by Fiammetta and the dwarf, too. They both share a profitable idea: making an enemy to become a friend. She gives up the purpose of finding a gondola as a place where working as a courtesan and thinks of how profitable can be to use Aretino to make their fortune. Here Venice supports their mood; outside it is a sunny day, there is a spring sun and the shimmering Grand Canal is even compared to an entrance to Heaven, an image validated also by the number of the visitors and of pilgrims who crowd boats gawping at the sight in front of them. *My God, what a view that would be - Venice spread at your feet as if you had been given shares in the wonder of the city*<sup>56</sup> : Bucino is now starting to comprehend that Venice is also friendly, beautiful, and that Fiammetta's words at their arrival, were a kind of true premonition about what being in this city would mean for them.

"Heaven on Earth" said Aretino, and this becomes a refrain in Bucino's mind. *It was tyhose same words my lady had used to tempt me onwards that first day in Venice, when our future felt as black as her bloodied scalp... As I think this...it is only now...that I feel we are truly arrived at where we set out to be*<sup>57</sup>. Though Venice will never be Rome to him, in the third part of the novel he looks at her with different eyes, comparing her to a lovely woman who lifts up her decorated skirt to miss the rising tides. Now, he is not more annoyed by the glare of the sunlight;

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 179.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p. 177.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p. 238.

he is rather attracted by this new sight, in which Venice offers such a sweetness to be compared to Arcadia, a place celebrated for her unspoiled and harmonious beauty, looking like a secluded area, an imaginary idyllic paradise in which he and the courtesan made up all that they lost in Rome, and in which they feel secure. The image of the Paradise is also recurrent in the third and ending part of the novel. It is Bucino, once again, who talks about a perfect garden into which a snake slithers on its way up into the branches of the apple tree; there is a clear reference to the biblical Genesis, in which temptation and sin win against virtue. When the dwarf considered Venice to be a kind of Paradise, he anticipates a black cloud that darkens the clear sky; inside the wonder of feeling good in this kind of Arcadian vision, there is also a sense of terror that they have risen so far and that there is, *therefore*, so far to fall. And they will fall, because of money: it is just the money that becomes the sin rather than the sexual act; Fiammetta falls in love with a young seventeen-years-old member of the Foscari family but the very point of the business is that a courtesan is paid to give pleasure, and once this breaks down, the whole collapses. This young man is the snake in their grass and love, the highest of feelings, now turns into *the only ailment fatal to a courtesan, for while the pox eats the body, it is love that destroys the mind*<sup>58</sup>.

*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts*<sup>59</sup> said the melancholy Jaques in 'As you like it', and the world is a stage where every man must play a part<sup>60</sup> said Antonio in 'The Merchant of Venice'. Bucino depicts Fiammetta as someone who is paid

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 296.

<sup>59</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, VII.

<sup>60</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, I, I

to give pleasure and to *pretend* to receive it. It is Fiammetta who plays a part, and she becomes the real victim of this pretence; when she falls in love she feels like she was a girl, but this is the moment in which she realizes that she never was such a thing. She feels alive, she feels herself maybe for the first time, because she thinks that this is the first time that she is the best woman in the world for a man, a man who does not treat her as if he owns her. At this point Fiammetta even lies to Bucino, and he uses a very apt image to comment on her behavior: *she continues to apply the paste, her face disappearing into the china whiteness of a carnival mask*<sup>61</sup>. What better parallelism than this: a woman who loses her strength wearing the mask of her vulnerability just in Venice, the cradle of disguise and masks. The essence of this kind of festivity was dressing up, particularly in masking; here lies the creative attitude of the Venetian people. According to a commonly told historical story, even though the mask seem that was used by ladies as a protection against the sun, it was an opportunity for the entire population (starting from the Doge himself), to obscure social class and individual identity, where power and poverty are mixed, and where freedom could hide behind various types of masks and black cloaks. There is another worth remembering detail: the word mask. It takes origin from the Latin word *larva*, which also stands for *ghost*. It is as if Bucino was looking at Fiammetta who, playing the part of the courtesan, is treating the good looking of a ghost, the haunting ghost of her girlhood, her youth, brutally stopped by prostitution.

Picturesque is the description of the *Sensa*, one of the most important festivity in the life of the Venetian community. The sky is so bright that Bucino compares it to a great Titian's paintbrush dragged

---

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p.258.

across the horizon. The city described is alive and the festival fever is vibrant. *Half of Europe will be buying here within the week*<sup>62</sup> is another evidence of the fact that Venice was a very popular destination, where the crowd was multitude in the alleys. The Sensa in particular was a celebration of a special day in the festive calendar: there was the procession of the Doge, in gold cloth, in a great golden galley called 'Bucintoro' to the middle of the lagoon, where he threw a wedding ring into it, marrying Venice to the sea, so to grant her power over the waters for one year. In St. Mark's square, also, craft and industry products were exposed: *this ceremonial madness and the great trade fair that accompanies it have the city bursting at the seams*<sup>63</sup>. Aside from this description, Dunant also puts in the fight between the *Castellani*, people who worked in the Arsenal and lived in the east part of Venice and the *Nicolotti*, who were fishermen living in the west part of the city (*The Castellani Arsenal workers...the men attacking, the Nicolotti gang from Dorsoduro... are fishermen off the boats of Adriatic...*<sup>64</sup>). At that time, Venice had her people divided in these two parts, to which corresponded precise districts; the *Castellani* area included the Castello, St. Mark and Dorsoduro districts, while that of *Nicolotti* had S. Polo, S. Croce, Cannaregio, S. Nicolò dei Mendicoli, Angelo Raffaele, S. Basegio, S. Margherita and S. Pantalon ones. In the novel, the fight is seen through Bucino's eyes; there are war chants with the names of the fighters, and there is so much crowd that the only thing people could do is watching the battle: one side has to drive the other backwards far enough to take possession of the bridge (a famous one was the fight on the Ponte dei Pugni). After the battle, brawls spread into the crowd, and the intervention

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, p.267.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, p. 303.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, p. 271.

of the security forces are required to quell the riot, often killing some people as to be an example for the others.

## CHURCH

Venice has always been a thorn in the side of Church, even though the *Serenissima* was a Catholic Republic. At Renaissance time, where *In the company of the courtesan* is set, there was a very corrupted church. It is at the very beginning of the novel that Dunant introduces the first references to it, when Fiammetta, in Rome, is thinking about someone to trust to his protection, at the time in which the war is dangerously forthcoming; *We must contact the cardinal*<sup>65</sup>, she tells Bucino. This sentence leaves no room for misunderstandings or doubts: a courtesan who looks for the help of a churchman. The cardinal's palace was in a street where people went to witness the processions that passed through the Vatican, where it was necessary to dress up because of the high level of wealth, while there was even more devastation and death all around, with dead or moaning bodies everywhere, and with soldiers who looked for leftover wealth among them.

Next to the purely economic corruption, there was also the scandalous sexual one. At that time, it was not surprising to find out that religious men had sexual relationships with courtesans. Bucino is a witness of the sexual encounters between Fiammetta and one of the cardinals of the circle of pope Clement VII; generally, this kind of behaviour was proper of very clever men who, while supported a pope in his power games, were also able to argue the purposes of an emperor. In the novel, Fiammetta has been the cardinal's favourite for years.

---

<sup>65</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, Virago, 2006, p. 27.

*Since no trader worth his salt buys sight unseen, there are public places where sellers can go to advertise their wares. And in this, for all her protestations of purity, Venice turns out to be no more virtuous or more imaginative than the Holy City itself. For courtesan, like everyone else, go to church*<sup>66</sup>: these are the preamble to the fifth chapter, where the dwarf describes how to gain the entry for a courtesan and to announce herself in a new city, Venice in the case. The church described in the novel, where Bucino and Fiammetta go to learn the movements of Venetian courtesans is that of San Zanipolo, where rich people used to go. In a church, faith and appearance could easily be mixed, and a sacred place for praying turned out to be also a marketplace for pursuing possible contacts: *All this fluttering makes for a perfect screen for more serious business*<sup>67</sup>, observes the dwarf.

Even though Venice was a Catholic city, Religion has never been something superior to the rights of the Republic, rather they were considered even more vital for the life of the state: the power of Catholic Church in Rome was never considered as superior, Venice always declared her independence from it. This has always been the key concept that originated a strong opposition by the Roman Curia, first of all for the election of bishops but, generally, because the republic claimed to exercise its own jurisdiction even on ecclesiastic competences. Not surprisingly, there were interdicts against Venice also for political reasons: for instance, when Venice tried to add the Duchy of Ferrara and part of the Romagna and of the Marche to her territory, pope Sisto IV Della Rovere decided that no religious function could be allowed and, later, pope Giulio II excommunicated, blamed and interdicted the city, but this time, too, Venice rejected the censorship for considering it as

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, p. 74-75.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, p. 79.



illegitimate. Popes were worried about the fact that Venice could increase her territory, adding also feuds that were owned by the Church.

The Venetian attitude was always rebel towards Rome; it went also against the papal bull by San Pio V who, after a brief rest with pope Paolo Farnese III, went on with the disciplinary intent against the republic: Venice could not allow people who were not Catholic such as Jews, Orthodox Greeks, Protestants studying at the university in Padua, and above all, the Council of Ten could not go against papal decisions; the immunity of the clergy was confirmed again, and this was the most unpleasant among the papal measures. Anyway, Venice did not give in and forbade the release of the papal bull in her whole territory.

Saint Mark's Clergy was headed by the *Primicerio*, a churchman elected by the Doge and by the *Patriarca*: both had to be patricians. These two figures, even though they were patricians, could not take decisions about political questions; as a matter of fact, they were not allowed to participate any constitutional meeting, and this was only for the fact that they were clerics.

Female monasteries were not so quiet as their function should have been. Venetian nuns were chosen among the best patrician families, but this was not a sufficient condition to guarantee order far from sins. There were many cases of undisciplined nuns (and also priests, of course); it was a condition that led to the institution of three Supervisors of the monasteries. As a matter of fact, Venetian monasteries had a very bad reputation because of the so called *moneghini*, young patrician boys who went to those convents where they tried to have some love affair with nuns (for instance, in 1565, three boys belonging to the Corner, Priuli and Contarini families, were examined also with torture, accused to have had carnal contacts with nuns, or in 1491 Balbi and Tagliapietra were

processed because they had love affairs with nuns belonging to the Holy Spirit)<sup>68</sup>. It must be remembered that a big part of those nuns entered the convent without feeling a true vocation. On the contrary, they were forced by their same parents or brothers to preserve family heritage (so that it was not necessary to provide the daughter with an adequate dowry) or to make sure that those women could achieve a worthy social status (in case parents could not afford a worthy dowry).

Nuns did not hesitate to rebel against the measures taken by Patriarchs: this is a refrain in the work of the Venetian historian Mario Sanudo, whose *Diarii* witnessed the High Renaissance period in Venice. He wrote about the *Celestia* convent, where he referred that there were nuns with long hair, in some cases also coiffed with pigtails. Even though the Patriarch had their hair cut, and grabbed two of them to take them to prison, the rest started to cry with such a loud voice, that he had to make a simple admonition to end the problem. Sanudo again, wrote of the Holy Spirit convent at the Zattere too, where the nun founder was accused of having love affairs with three men: a priest, a Greek man and the doctor of the convent. The process in which she was involved ended with her absolution and her restoration in the convent, and many are the other cases of kidnapped, pregnant and escaping nuns.

In 1527, the year of the sack of Rome, Patriarca Querini ordered that Luther's books should be burned in Venice; the city did not approve his decision, but Venetian editions of the Talmud were burned, just to please the Patriarca. It was true that the Church had to please Venice too: during trials of the ecclesiastic court it had to be present one of the so called *Tre Savi all'Eresia* at least, that is three lay magistrates who had to

---

<sup>68</sup> A. Zorzi, *A Venezia nel '500, il secolo di Tiziano*, p. 267.

grant the interests of the Venetian government. The ecclesiastic court could not resolve any judgment without the Savi assisting to the process.

At the beginning of the Sixteenth century the Patriarch thought that wars, invasions from foreign countries, plagues and also earthquakes in Venetian territory, were all consequences of bad behaviour, of immorality and of lust of pleasure. He adopted very hard measure also against those women who were considered *erbere* (witches); in 1518 two of them were sent away from Venice after being lashed by the *Cappe Nere*, because they were accused to have cheated a woman making her pay a lot of money to buy a magic filter of love. These facts make the reader of the *Courtesan* think about La Draga, the blind woman who cured people with strange mixes of various herbs and who is suspected to have also murdered many children and to use parts of their bodies to create some potions. Bucino is the first to be wary of her, and people in general think she is a witch: at the end of the novel, she will die drowned in the canal of Orphans, charged with witchcraft.

## **THE JEWS IN IN THE COMPANY OF THE COURTESAN**

*But this city is so full of strangers with strange religions that the Jews feel more familiar than most, and while they might be confined to the Ghetto at night, they walk in the streets in daylight like any other men.*<sup>69</sup>

Another topic that is frequently associated with the city of Venice and that is widely known in History and Literature is the Jewish question: *As is the debate about the Jews. You hear it in the taverns and on the Rialto daily: those who believe that the Devil resides in Jewish loins and that usury pollutes the soul of any Christian who takes their money, versus the merchants, for whom pragmatism is a virtue and who need Jewish purses to keep their business afloat. I think every Venetian has a bit of both men in him somewhere, though the merchant has the louder voice these days*<sup>70</sup>. At that time, Venice was a strategic point for economic trade in the Adriatic area: her geographic location was naturally favored by the meeting of the sea and terrestrial trade. She attracted the interest of foreign merchants (in the twenty-fourth chapter Bucino says this about Venice: *I cannot think of another city in Christendom where he and I could sit and talk like this. For all that the Venetians and the Turks spit fire and death at each other at sea, neither side lets religion interfere*

---

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Dunant, *In the company of the courtesan*, 2006, p.120

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 248

*too much when it comes to trade*<sup>71</sup>) and of Jews too, who were allowed to practice money lending from 1348.

In the novel, the Jews are mentioned in chapter two for the first time; it is Meragosa who indicates the Jews to Bucino who was looking for good pawnbrokers: *The only lending here is done by Jews*<sup>72</sup> and it is clear that their money lending is the most interesting and distinguishing identifying mark for the cities where they went: *..then he explained the terms of the bond as laid down by the state, gave me the document to sign, and counted out my coins...his attention was more on the jewels than on me*<sup>73</sup>. Bucino's words point up the fact that the Jew is not impressed by his physical aspect, nor considers that he is an ugly dwarf; the only thing that matters is business.

There were reasons if Venice granted favors to the Jews. They brought considerable capital, their rate of interest was not floating but, on the contrary, fixed and controlled; this inaugurated a fresh new economic structure that was going to become part of the Venetian economic system. It was easier to force them to lower rates imposed on customers rather than Christian people, and easier was also to ask for loans by the rulers or the local administrations. Venice allowed them to open banks but imposed a tax on this kind of permission obtaining money from concessions. The economic partnership was granted by the *condotta*, a ten-years agreement between the city authorities and the Jewish bankers: they could elect their own leaders who had to pay 4.000 ducats a year and the usual taxes if they imported or exported merchandise. This kind of economic activity was controlled by the so called *Piovego* which had the legal capacity of judging heretics and also the Jews. Their bankers

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, p. 279.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 48

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 49

were free to live in Venice but only for a limited period. The Venetian authority decided that Jewish people could not buy nor possess any immovable property in the Venetian territory, so that they were forced to keep only their cash promoting the business of lending; this marked with inability for them to settle down. In the course of years some Jews moved to Holland but their community had to continue to pay also the rent of the houses that stood unoccupied, because that was the contract.

Jews were confined to Mestre with the possibility of spending fifteen days every four months in Venice and then they were allowed only fifteen days a year. According to the Church, at first Jewish men had to wear a distinctive mark, a yellow "O" stitched on their jacket and then the mark changed and became a yellow hat. At the beginning of the sixteenth century Venice counted a large number of refugees and the Venetian government felt worried about overcrowding; that was the reason why the refugees were intimidated to go out of the city and go back to theirs. In particular, Jews had to leave within a month, and during this short time they were forced to stay at home if they did not want to go to prison for a month. These were the conditions, but with exceptions only for bankers: they could stay in Venice for business. But the Venetian government realized that the Jews could turn out to be very useful to the economy of the city: treasury was seriously damaged and ordinary people needed money and those bankers could lend it. Under these circumstances, they were readmitted in Venice again.

There was another problem for the Jew community: Christian preachers railed against the members who were refugees coming back from the mainland: they urged Christians to plunder them. Also for this description, Bucino's words are the clearest: *..the fact that they killed our Lord, which in the eyes of many makes them more fearful than the Devil*

*itself.. men who seemed to scuttle in the shadows, and for this reason it was easy to fear them.*<sup>74</sup> It was a scandal for Venetian Christians, when it was proposed to concentrate all the Jews in the Giudecca island: among those preachers then, it was spreading the idea that misfortunes were happening to Venice because of the presence of the Jews and of their synagogues. Noted that they were economically necessary at that time, the Council proposed to force The Jews to live in a closed area, in the *sestiere* named *Cannaregio*, called *Ghetto*: the one in Venice was the first to be set in Europe in March 1516. According to tradition, the word *ghetto* comes from the dialect "geto", a place where metals were smelted, but History doomed the word to become synonymous with segregated neighborhood. *The ghetto, when I found it, was like a small town, cordoned off by walls and great wooden gates; inside, houses and shops huddled and scrambled together.*<sup>75</sup> Here, Jews had to pay an expensive rent: when the new arrivals moved in, rentals were raised one-third more than their landlords'. The ghetto had doors that were unlocked when the *Marangona* rang at dawn and that were closed at sunset by four Christian guardians paid from the same Jew community herself: they could not have their own family, because they had only to watch over the ghetto's doors; more, there were also two boats that were patrolling day and night (*your existence so poisonous that you must be locked inside a ghetto at sunset and even pay the wages of the soldiers who guard your gates*<sup>76</sup>). Jews could only go out when the doors were closed if they did not want to pay a fee. Doctors were the only who had more possibility of going out of the ghetto, but they had to give the list of their work commitments to the guardians who had the duty to inform the Inquisitors. The most honorable

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibidem, p. 119

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem, p. 49

<sup>76</sup> Ibidem, p.158

profession that Jews could exercise was just the medical one: in the thirteenth century the Church imposed that Christians should not be cured by Jewish doctors, (*others see you as the Devil's missionaries*<sup>77</sup>) but this order was upheld in the XVI century. Pietro Aretino wrote a letter to Elia Alfani, a Jewish doctor who healed a woman dear to him; this letter was intended to be published together with others. Quoting another prominent figure, Yaqob ben Shemu'el Mantino obtained the privilege of wearing a black hat instead of the yellow Jewish mark: he became personal doctor to Pope Paul III.

Then, money lending was not the only job that the Jews could do, nor the only purpose to remember them. In the sixth chapter of the novel Fiammetta makes a list of all the things that she needs to have to be a real courtesan again: perfume, jewelry and clothes. Bucino tells her that the Jews were sharp running the second-hand market, better than in Rome: they were so sharp that they could *sell tomorrow's fashions before today's are old*<sup>78</sup>. In the so called *strazzaria* the Jews really sold second-hand products, above all clothes: *in Venice, as in the rest of the Christendom, they do only the dirtier jobs, like lending money or buying what is already used*<sup>79</sup>; *He arrived from the Ghetto with his two assistants carrying huge bundles on their backs and when they undo them, my lady's room was transformed into a market stall of cloth: rainbows of velvet, brocades, and silk dresses*<sup>80</sup>. The *strazzaruoli* could show and sell their merchandise in the *rive* which were controlled by the ghetto's guardians who held the keys. Among their customers there were also members of Venetian nobility. The biggest *strazzaruoli* could even lend

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibidem, p.158

<sup>78</sup> Ibidem, p.90

<sup>79</sup> Ibidem, p.119

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, p. 120



drapes and other kind of furnishing to the state, for any civil or religious event.

The houses in the ghetto were elevated buildings, even nine floors high; this particular detail about houses is a singular aspect of that area of Venice. The apartments had fairly low ceilings and were made of wood.

Community life in the ghetto was very lively; during the day there were many activities, there were Jewish people with different origin among Christians who went there to trade merchandise or to borrow from bankers. It was governed by a Jew Council which had to cope with the local administration and with any complaints by the members of the community itself who are traditionally said to be contentious. Over time, also synagogues were admitted in the ghetto. Every "nation", that was the different origin of the Jews, could have its own meetings in which religious items were discussed, while economic issues were headed by eighty people who constituted the general assembly; every "nation" could elect its own rabbis who guaranteed the rites. Even though some Jew converted to Christianity, there is no evidence that Jews were subjected to a forced conversion; the synagogues in the ghetto are still the proof of the high level of well-being they reached in Venice, even though they had often to cope with humiliation, incomprehension and difficulties, for example in sexual union: only a Venetian man could give his surname to a child had with a Jewish woman, because a Jew would grow up his child according the principles of his own religion. For these reasons, courtesans were generally suspected and publicly punished with lashes for having sex with Jewish men. Anyway, the Jews together with other settlers of different ethnicity, gave their contribute to the power and the texture of Venice itself. They were safer here than in any other place of the world, even though they were squeezed for their capitals; being a

cosmopolitan city, Venice always practiced tolerance towards minorities. These words of the dark-eyed Jew to Bucino confirm the concept: *Venice is a safe city for us Jews. I think perhaps it is because here there are already so many people who are different from one another, yes?*<sup>81</sup>. Venetian authorities would not permit the Jews to be persecuted. Even though they were tolerant, the fact is that the ghetto was a Venetian invention; *They lived in the here-and-now. The pope was in Rome, and God was in Heaven, but they were in Venice*<sup>82</sup>. Peace and order, especially for business, were the foundations of the Republic where there was only an authority, its own; it was better to contain them while profiting from them.

McCarthy underlines the fact that the Venetians are different from the rest of Italian people. She thinks that their dignity, their ceremonious courtesy, their peacefulness and non-violent-passivity suggest *a Jewish strain in their nature*<sup>83</sup>, and this can be seen also in works of art (especially by Titian and Tintoretto), where Venetian dignitaries seem to have the look of the priests of the Temple, and where the Biblical scenes were very recurrent (in paintings by Jacopo Bassano, for example).

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem, p. 127

<sup>82</sup> Mary McCarthy, *Venice observed*, Harcourt ed., 1963, p. 64

<sup>83</sup> Ibidem, p.56.

## **ROBERTA RICH**

\*

Roberta Rich is a novelist born in Buffalo, New York, in the USA on 9 January 1946. She raised in Buffalo and settled in Rochester, New York, taking a turn for a better climate and looking for better opportunities for a little time, before moving to Canada in the 1960s with her first husband, who was a teacher at the University of Calgary. She earned an undergraduate degree in English and Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, where she took a graduate degree in Law, too. She spent twenty-five years as a family law attorney in private practice in Vancouver, before selling her practice in 1990.

Rich has been writing since her high school years, she has always had the passion for this kind of practice. Before she became an International bestsellers writer, she had previously written two unpublished novels based on her experience as a divorce lawyer, a job which brought to her lots of stories about human relationships. At the University of Toronto she took the course by the novelist Joy Fielding on how to write a bestseller, and he became one of her mentors along the route to publication. It must be added that before becoming a lawyer and then a famous writer, Rich has been also a waitress, a nurse's aide, a hospital admitting clerk.

Rich is quite an interesting woman. She defines herself happy when she has interviews to complete or to answer to, because she likes to think that there are people interested in what she is and what she has to say. Her idea of misery is finding herself stuck in an airport with nothing

to read; she declares to be pleased to live in Colima, Mexico and Vancouver, her chief characteristic is curiosity, her greatest extravagance is collecting Mont Blanc pens and loyalty is maybe the most important value to her. Unable to bear hypocrisy, her favorite virtue is tolerance, her favourite occupation is writing and among things she dislikes there is earnestness above all. She has one daughter and three step-children and also loves animals: as a matter of fact she has a German Shepherd, tropical fishes and parakeets. She lives between Vancouver and Colima.

# **THE MIDWIFE OF VENICE**



## **INTRODUCTION**

*Did such a midwife exist? I like to think so, although in my research I never came across a reference to such a woman. This is no doubt because the history of women, their fortitude and accomplishments, is written in water.*<sup>84</sup>

Roberta Rich

*The Midwife of Venice* is quite an interesting novel from many points of view. Starting from its structure, the book is divided in twenty-four chapters which are divided, in turn, in two kinds of settings: the city of Venice and the city of Valleta, in the island of Malta. Two chapters set in Venice are always followed by other two set in Valleta, until the end of the book, in which there is a change, because the protagonists are planning to move to Constantinople, where is set the continuation of *The Midwife of Venice*, that is *The Harem Midwife*.

The inspiration for writing about Venice and the Ghetto came to the author as she was wandering through the city, during a walking tour that she made with her husband, in 2007. She was struck by how closely the small island of the Ghetto Nuovo, in Cannaregio, resembled a movie set with open square with only a wellhead to break the expanse, and narrow, knife-sharp buildings enclosing the campo on three sides. She tried to imagine what day-to-day life must have been like in the XVI century,

---

<sup>84</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, Ebury Press, p. 330.

when women raised large families in overcrowded conditions, because more and more Jews arrived from the Northern Europe, Spain and Portugal, and the tiny apartments shrank even more as they were partitioned into cramped living quarters, where floors were added, as the city's government permitted to expand to two additional islands, called Ghetto Vecchio and Ghetto Nuovissimo. Above all, what about women? She wanted to know more about them. Standing in the middle of the square she tried to imagine how they survived, how they cook food, who they married, how many children died in childbirth and, on the contrary, how many survived infancy, how they buried their dead.

Once back in Vancouver, she wanted to read a historical novel set in the Ghetto Nuovo that could answer all her questions, but she found that no such a novel existed; she considered this as a sort of gap she had to fill, and so she devoured everything she could find about life in the Venetian Ghetto.

The scene opens in the Ghetto Nuovo, in Venice, in 1575. The main character is Hannah Levi, a Jewish midwife who has gained renown for her skills in coaxing reluctant children out of their mother's belly using her birthing spoons, as she calls them, that are a rudimental form of today's forceps. The narration sheds light on the little-known lives of Jewish women in Venice during Renaissance.

Hannah's husband, Isaac, is a Jew too and has been captured by mercenaries while on a trading voyage and is being held on ransom on the isle of Malta, in the city of Valleta.

One night, a Christian nobleman called Conte Paolo Di Padovani, together with his brother Jacopo, goes to the Ghetto looking for Hannah's house; he is terribly in need but has an impossible request, that is asking, imploring, the midwife to help his dying wife Lucia who is suffering terrible

pains and who is close to death in childbirth and save their unborn child. It was an impossible request because a Papal edict considered a crime punishable by death for Jews to render medical treatment to Christians, and at first Hannah, influenced by the presence of the Rabbi, refuses to offer her help, even though she feels compassion for this man and for his wife. The Rabbi insists on Hannah to refuse because being the Jews forbidden to treat Christian patients, and if either the mother or the child dies, she will bring the wrath of Christian Venice down on everyone in the Ghetto, and should anyone in the Conte's house discover her birthing spoons, the forbidden tool she invented to assist with deliveries, she could also be charged with witchcraft. It is at this point that the Conte tries another strategy to persuade her: he asks Hannah how much she wanted to go against the law and make herself available. She decides to accept this agreement, and asks two-hundred ducats, a huge sum of money, enough to enable her to sail to Malta to ransom her beloved husband Isaac, slave of the Knights of Saint John.

Against the Rabbi's advice, Hannah goes with the Conte to their gondola and then reaches their palace, where a beautiful description of the author highlights the differences between the reality of the Jewish Ghetto and that one of noble and Christian Venice.

Many chapters are dedicated to the description of the delivering of the stubborn infant, as describes his father the Count Di Padovani: interesting are the religious complications of the time as well as historical medicine and, in this context, the role of Renaissance women in the dark atmosphere of the city of Venice.

The author skips back and forth between the couple's stories. Hannah helps Countess Lucia to give birth to a healthy son, Matteo, then gives the Count her shadai, her good luck charm, to be always kept on

the little chest of the baby, to safeguard him against Lilith, the Death Angel and against Jacopo and Niccolò, Matteo's uncles, who want to kill the newborn to gain the entire heritage of the Di Padovani family, because he is deeply indebted.

Unfortunately, on her way back to the Ghetto, Hannah realizes that she forgot her birthing spoons on the floor of Countess Lucia's room, near the bed, and she feels terribly worried about her destiny: she could be denounced to the Inquisition and charged to death, so that she could never save nor see her beloved husband Isaac.

After a month, Jacopo, one of the two brothers of Count Di Padovani, goes to the Jewish Ghetto at Hannah's house to invite her to a dinner at Di Padovani's palace, to have back her amulet, but he has another purpose: he wants the two hundred ducats in exchange of the birthing spoons, which he found and stole from the room; if she refuses, he blackmails her by threatening to report her to the Inquisition.

At the dinner, she manages to have her birthing spoons back and to keep also the money, because she risks her own life asking the Conte Di Padovani if this rudimental forceps has been found anywhere, explaining that this was a necessary instrument that saved the life of both the Countess Lucia and of their son Matteo; so the Count orders to the housekeeper to look for the birthing spoons and, in the end, it was Jacopo who kept them. The two Counts have to leave suddenly for Ferrara, and after their leaving, Matteo suddenly disappears. Hannah discovers that Niccolò Di Padovani has taken the baby, and decides to follow him, who is secretly going, on a black gondola, to the Jewish Ghetto, with the intention to kill him in the Jewish abbattoir, wanting Matteo's murder to look like Jewish responsibility: according to Jacopo, Jews are mostly moneylenders and infidels who have been swindling Christians for



decades. Hannah manages to save the baby by killing Niccolò and throwing him in the canal, but bad news from the Di Padovani: both the Counts were dead from the terrible plague that was spreading in Italy in that period.

After Niccolò's murder, Hannah looks for shelter and protection at Jessica's house, her sister who converted to Christianity and who was a *cortigiana honesta*. Once at home, and after resolving all the disagreements of their family and religions, Jessica decides to help her sister and stages a disguise to throw off Jacopo's suspicions about Hannah, so as not to be accused of murder and witchcraft and then sentenced to death. When the Examining Magistrate from the office of the *Prosecuti* and Jacopo reach Jessica's house, she says that her sister Hannah was affected with the plague, convincing him that it was no hoax; the Hebrew letters on the shadai and the appalling stench of feces repelled the Magistrate and this discouraged closer inspection. Jacopo insists he should punish Hannah for kidnapping his nephew (but Jessica told the Magistrate that Matteo was Hannah's son) and also because she was a midwife and a witch, but the Magistrate decides to put some soldiers outside Jessica's house and to let three days pass, and then they go away. Some time later, someone shoots Jessica who dies in Hannah's arms; she is sure that the murderer is Jacopo, and that sooner or later, she and the baby will have the same destiny.

Another disguise is staged: Hannah runs upstairs to Jessica's bedchamber and grabs her page costume, stuffs her hair under a green little hat and bound her breasts becoming a black-eyed boy. She takes Matteo in her arms and runs away to the Di Padovani palace, to leave there the baby, but when she arrives, the housekeeper Giovanna, is afraid of catching the plague, because she sees the buboes on his skin,

and does not leave enough time to Hannah to explain that those were only part of a necessary disguise, and Giovanna threatens she will summon the *Prosecuti*. So Hannah adopts Matteo in a way, and is resolute in wanting to reach Malta to ransom her husband Isaac and make a new start with a child in their family.

Hannah, dressed as a Christian in one of Jessica's gown of blue silk, goes on the *Balbiana*, a Venetian ship which sails to go to the isle of Malta. She needs to find a nurse who can feed the baby because the milk she has, is about to end. On this ship, she knows Tarzi, a Turkish woman who will let her *ikbal*, Hatice, a Circassian slave from the mountains, feed Matteo with her milk; to reciprocate the favor, Hannah decides to offer Tarzi forbidden knowledge on contraception, teaching her the way to avoid unwanted pregnancies: as a matter of fact, she has many daughters and does not want more.

Woven through Hannah's travails are Isaac's hardships as a slave in Malta; blessed with charm and wit, he earns scraps of food as a scribe and pins his hopes for freedom on bartering his precious silkworm eggs. He believes that his wife Hannah has died in the plague, but she, instead, manages to sail to Valleta before he manages to buy his passage to a new life in Constantinople. At first, Isaac is sold to Joseph, a very rough Turk, secondly he is sold to a Nun who takes him to her convent with the intention to convert Isaac to Christianity, but without achievement. Isaac clings with all his strength at the thought of his wife and keeps the faith to his beliefs; he struggles, but never ceases to believe that one day he will meet his wife again. During an escape attempt he is made prisoner once more, but Hannah manages to prevent him to be sold to work hardily in one of Joseph's galleons, and offering the amount requested by the rough man, he gets freedom, his wife, and together with Matteo and with the

money Hannah had from the Count Di Padovani, they plan to sail to Constantinople and start a new life, the man trading silk and the woman being a midwife (Rich's next novel is titled *The Harem Midwife*).

# **LITERARY CHOICES IN** **THE MIDWIFE OF VENICE**



Writing *The Midwife of Venice* was a great opportunity for Roberta Rich, because through fiction she had the chance to know more and more about Venice's Renaissance period, about her history; as a matter of fact, this is among the purposes of Historical Novel. Unlike *In the Company of the Courtesan* by Sarah Dunant, Rich does not insert real characters, but depicted only an interesting historical framework, with shades of social criticism, reproducing social and cultural features in a very close way to reality. Characters are very likely, they are the mirror of the society and culture in which the novel is set. Atmospheres, custom and traditions, mentality, common sense, life in general are conscientiously recreated faithfully to the Renaissance historical truth.

As mentioned in the chapter *About the novel*, *The Midwife of Venice* is set in two fundamental cities which open the doors of the world of the second half of Renaissance in XVI century. The story begins in Venice and in a specific place: the *Ghetto Nuovo*, in 1575.

The plot is not a linear one, and if *In the Company of the Courtesan* is set in the first half of Renaissance, *The Midwife* is set in the second one. Even though the period of time is only one year, 1575, there are contemporaneous descriptions of events: the story of the main characters, Hannah and Isaac, is divided in two settings and fragmented in couple of chapters which are set first in Venice and then in the isle of

Malta. There are, of course, many shifting passages and each couple of chapters ends leaving the reader at a loss of words for the suspense they cause. It is a third person narration. The narrator is external, omniscient and heterodiegetic; the reader can dominate the narration because he is totally informed about events by this kind of narrator who seems to investigate the minds of the characters and who is everywhere, shifting from place to place. There are many comments made by the narrator. The first one is in the fourth chapter, where Isaac is asked to convert to Christendom by Sister Assunta; it is not the simple third person narration, because the narrator seems to express personal judgements about events and, in a way, he seems to want to take part of the character's feelings: *Convert? To the Christians, he would be no better than a marrano, a pig rooting around for scraps. By his own people he would be seen as a traitor and a coward...Being a Jew and the hope of seeing Hannah again were all he had left.*<sup>85</sup>

In chapter six there are two different comments. The first one, which opens the chapter, is made just when Hannah leaves the Countess' room and is about to go back home. Giovanna, the housekeeper, tells her to collect her fee and get out; Hannah thinks the opposite of being grateful to her, but it seems that the best disposition to have, is the one that seems to be suggested by the narrator. Here, he seems to want to give advice or to express a personal judgement: *The woman was already a foe, but why make it worse? "I thank you for your help, Giovanna"*<sup>86</sup>. The second occasion of comment is given by the *shadai*, a little amulet, the good luck charm that Hannah gives to the newborn to be protected by Lilith, the Angel of the Death, *the slayer of*

---

<sup>85</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, Ebury Press, 2011, p. 62.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87

newborns<sup>87</sup>. Jacopo, the Count's brother and the child's uncle, diminishes the religious power and meaning of the amulet saying that a Jewish amulet can not protect a Christian baby and, worse, that this could be a way to place a spell on the child. Before Hannah could frame an answer to this effrontery, the narrator comments with a mixture of irony and anger: *What reply could one make to such a remark?*<sup>88</sup>.

In chapter ten Hannah sees the Countess very worried about her child's destiny because of the harm he could suffer from his uncles for the family heritage and from the threatening coming for the plague. Hannah remembers of a young woman in the Ghetto who, unsettled in her mind after a difficult travail, placed a pillow over her infant's face, smothering him; when questioned by the authorities, the woman said that she had done it to keep him safe from all harm. Here, the narrator seems to support Hannah's cares, and intervenes saying: *Surely the Contessa was not contemplating such an act?*<sup>89</sup>.

In chapter eleven, Hannah is still at the Counts' house. She is worried about Jacopo, because he blackmailed her: he has her birthing spoons and if she wants them back and avoid the call of the Officers of the Inquisition, she has to give her fee of two hundred ducats to him. She would like to tell the truth to the Count about the childbirth, but she is also afraid of his reaction and of the bad consequences: her life is at risk and without the money she could not save his husband Isaac, captive in the isle of Malta. Here the narrator supports her doubts rightly: *If she were to tell the Conte his brother was extorting money from her, could she rely on him to come to her aid?*<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibidem, p. 92.

<sup>88</sup> Ibidem, p. 94.

<sup>89</sup> Ibidem, p. 141.

<sup>90</sup> Ibidem, p. 151.

Another example of the narrator's irony is at the beginning of chapter 12, where Isaac is now Joseph's property; he is not eating for so long and now has victuals, shelter, an occupation of sorts and can sleep in his stable at night, next to wagons, carts and horses that munch their hay all night relentlessly. This description is introduced by the narrator as soaring or improving Isaac's condition, but with irony: *In the past week Isaac's fortunes had, if not soared –for how could anyone describe the eating of mouldy bread and half-rotten fish as soaring?- at least improved.*<sup>91</sup>

In chapter thirteen Hannah defends her own life and the one of Matteo (the Counts' child) from his uncle Niccolò who is determined to kill him in the Ghetto. She manages to catch Niccolò's knife and to kill him by stabbing him repeatedly, with terror and fury in her eyes. The narrator, here, is astonished for her impetus: *Perhaps she was possessed. Were these not the actions of a witch? Tacking pleasure in wounding? Even with the infant in her arms, even with Niccolò lying motionless, his blood pooling at her feet, she wanting to continue hacking at his flesh*<sup>92</sup>. This is a very strong comment for the fact that people like Giovanna, then generally Christian, believed seriously that midwives like Hannah, the Jewish women, were witches or something very similar: witches who took part to the Shabbas and, possessed, adored Satan.

In chapter sixteen there is another reference to possession and evil. Hannah is at her sister Jessica's home where she confesses she killed Niccolò. Still trembling, she expresses the will of placing the knife under the bed pillow, because she is afraid that his brother Jacopo could find her and bring her to the *Prosecuti*. The narrator here, surely to grow the reader suspense, seems to think out loud: *Could she do it again?*

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, p. 159.

<sup>92</sup> Ibidem, p. 187.

*Attack a man like a creature possessed by the devil?*<sup>93</sup>; there is a hint, there is Hannah's personality ambiguously discussed.

The characters are essentially twelve, and each one has a specific role in the sense that he or she represents a slice of the big cake called History. Hannah and Isaac are a Jewish married couple; the Di Padovani family are exponents of the Venetian nobility; Giovanna, their housekeeper, represents the common opinion and all the prejudices of that period of time; Jessica is Hannah's sister who converted to Christendom, marries a Christian and then becomes a courtesan; the Rabbi of the Ghetto Nuovo representing the entire Jewish Community and its rules; Sister Assunta in Malta who represents Christian Church and Joseph the Turk.

The novel has twenty-four chapters. There are not particular reasons for choosing Venice as the setting of the plot. It is not as in the *Courtesan*, where the city is not only the setting, but also a sort of chorus in the narration and also a characters because with her descriptions, Dunant makes her express her will of participate to the events of the narrations. Rich went to Venice for a pleasure trip, and she felt very impressed by this city, in particular by the structure of the Ghetto. There, a great curiosity came upon her: how did people live there? Why that part of Venice was so different from the rest of the city? How was the life of women in the Jewish Ghetto? Which were the relationships between Christians and Jews at that time? But above all... Women: how was the life of a midwife? These are the purposes which made her searching for all the pieces of information to catch what was really life in that period. Once back home, Rich searched for a historical novel which could give her all the answers she was looking for, but with her surprise she could

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem, p. 218.



not find any, that is the reason why she devoured all the books she was able to, wanting to achieve as much knowledge as she could about those themes, with the aim of giving the same knowledge, writing to fill this precious historical gap, creating *The Midwife*.

*Not only did Roberta Rich transport me to sixteenth-century Venice, with its seductive tapestry of smells, sights, textures and beliefs, she involved me in a poignant story of seasoned love. I don't know which I admired more – the wonderfully realized setting or the suspenseful story of Hannah and Isaac.*

Katherine Ashenburg<sup>94</sup>

As historical novels open windows onto the past, as mentioned before, Roberta Rich proved to be a gifted writer. She has shed light on parts of society previously hidden from readers' view. As the Toronto Globe & Mail writes, Rich's wry humor leavens a serious subject: her novel is a gripping historical page-turner, with a lot of suspenseful actions in XVI century Venice.

*The Midwife* is a fluent reading, its simplicity makes it a delight to be read, and makes also that the reader can immerge completely into the plot. Beside to this simplicity, however, there is a great deal of research into the city of Venice, looking for her historical details; this novel is a mix of romance and cultural conflict. The narrative has the quality of a folk-tale<sup>95</sup>; one of its best qualities are its dialogues, and the reader is constantly amused.

Rich explores very interesting themes: one of these is midwifery. The reader comes to be curious about women living in that period of time,

---

<sup>94</sup> <http://penguinrandomhouse.ca>

<sup>95</sup> <http://romanticarmchairtraveller.typepad.com>

wondering how could it be their life and how far they could go in their job. From the XVII century the Venetian Republic took steps to officially recognize some sort of relief to the categories of professional midwives who were admitted to the *Collegio dei Medici*. Starting from 1624 it was determined that they would support some sort of aptitude test for professional practice in front of a doctor of the *Magistrato della Sanità* and two expert and recognized midwives.

Unlike *the Courtesan* by Dunant, the title *The Midwife of Venice* reveals the main character of the novel, the Jewish midwife Hannah Levi. She is a real heroine, and manages to captivate the reader's attention from the beginning of the story. She seems to have a kind of supernatural strength in her personality and throughout her life, so that she can seem almost unbelievable sometimes. Hannah is absolutely the character who has the largest thickness and who counts the largest amount of pages that the author dedicates to a character.

It is through Hannah, her sister Jessica and the Venetian Countess Lucia that the author depicts the strength of women in general: they are strong regardless of their status or religion, and face with courage the precariousness of their lives. This is fundamental for the reader, because Rich captivates the attention totally, until the end of the book, even in the passages which seem to be the most predictable ones.

Hannah is a wife, a midwife, and Jewish; these are three elements which give a definite connotation of this woman who sometimes is thought to be predictable and unbelievable just for the strength she demonstrates to have in every difficult situation, as if she had a sort of supernatural resources that usually people do not have. It seems that her spirit is guided by the words *frangar non flectar* to indicate a process of adaptation in the negative events of life. Starting from her religion, the

novel shows how difficult the relationships between Christians and Jews were at that time, even though Venice was a city in which Jews (but also foreign people in general) were much tolerated and admitted than anywhere else in Italy. She lives in the Ghetto Novo with her husband Isaac, a merchant; but when he decides to try to expand his trade with the Levant and leaves Venice, she has to face life on her own.

The fact that the Count Di Padovani, a Christian nobleman, asks for the help of the Jewish midwife, is very singular; the law did not allow that a Christian could be cured by a Jew, and it seems as if the author, within her fiction and through her fictional characters, would like to send a message of integration and remove those barriers that sometimes are only prejudices and that are so currently vivid even nowadays. Hannah is very brave. She is the protagonist in a Christian world where Jews and Christians are basically strangers to each other and where the superstition and the prejudice of that time make suspicions about each other grow. She risks everything by accepting to go to the house of the Counts, starting from her own life and ending with the threat on the whole Ghetto; she does not listen to the Rabbi, and is guided only by her altruism in the name of life, because childbirth is a gift of God, no matter what religion or the different names that God has.

Hannah is also a devoted wife. It is refreshing to read about a romance where the couple is so secure in their love for each other, with no contrived conflict to make them doubt each other, and where bigger issues like culture and economics are what keep them apart.<sup>96</sup> Hannah accepts to help the Count's wife also for the love of her own husband, captured by the Knights of Malta and kept prisoner in the isle of Valletta: the money earned by helping Countess Lucia in her difficult childbirth is

---

<sup>96</sup> <https://literarytreats.wordpress.com>

the necessary to pay the ransom and to preserve her husband's life. She puts aside her own vulnerability to make space to something more precious: her courage. What makes her brilliant among the rest of the characters of the novel, is the painful intersection of individual morals versus responsibility toward the common good, and personal faith versus religious and secular law.<sup>97</sup>

One of the most interesting details about Hannah is that suffering, fears and also violence (for example when she has to face Niccolò Di Padovani in the Ghetto to save Matteo) are constantly threatening her, but she seems notably unscathed by their thickness, except on the level of normal physical reactions such as fast heart beating, aching in general and much sweat. She seems to have a kind of ability to get herself out of problems quickly, with that resolute readiness that makes her fall still standing, without losing her control over things, people and events. Maybe this kind of disposition can diminish the emotional impact on the reader, and maybe also history can be softened by the suspense of the narrative plot where the character faces bad events and fortune as a matter of course.

The fact remains that Hannah is cunning, independent, courageous and sensible, all qualities that keep the attention concentrated on her and on her vicissitudes. When she is in countess Lucia's bedchamber and she acts as midwife, the reader is definitely put right in the same room, feeling the same apprehension, breathing the same dangerous air, suffering the same condition of pain, constantly hoping that the life of both mother and child will survive: Hannah is bright and has drive. Her fragility and vulnerability are touching: these characteristics make suspense grow more and more, because she seems to fall down for this difficult

---

<sup>97</sup> <http://romanticarmchairtraveller.typepad.com>

childbirth. She feels her strength vanishing little by little. But her readiness of mind encourages speed-reading; the author wisely built cliffhanger chapter endings.

Another interesting woman in the novel is Hannah's sister, Jessica. The same Roberta Rich declared that she is sorry for having brought her out of the novel prematurely<sup>98</sup>. Hannah's relationship with her sister is confusing and undeveloped. Jessica is a character who could say more, and who is not known entirely for the speed of the events. Jessica compares in two chapters of the book, and her story is not very clear. Surely she is useful from the historical perspective; she is a Jewish woman who converted to Christianity to marry a gentile and a well-known courtesan, but the reader comes to know these pieces of information only by a brief dialogue between Jessica and Hannah. There is not depth; for what she represents, maybe it would have been better learn more about Jessica, about her life in the Ghetto and the reasons why she decided to become a courtesan. Anyway, the fact remains that she is another strong woman, removed by her family and community for ever because she changes her religion. A strong woman, because she makes her own living without anybody's help, managing to reach a good social position and a comfortable and beautiful house. A strong woman, because she helps her sister to avoid the Magistrate's suspicions. Clever enough to stage a perfect disguise that save both the lives of her sister Hannah and of Matteo, the counts' son. Brave, to risk her own life to help her sister, just as she did with Countess Lucia. As a matter of fact, Jessica deserves more than a brief appearance.

Countess Lucia is the most fragile of the characters of the novel. She is almost dying in childbirth also because of her ill health;

---

<sup>98</sup> [www.robetarich.com](http://www.robetarich.com)

nevertheless, with Hannah's support, she finds the necessary strength to give life to her precious son Matteo who will be the only heir of the Di Padovani fortunes. Very little is known about this delicate woman, and here comes the opportunity to underline some negative aspects of this novel.

Nothing is said about the Di Padovani family: there are only descriptions of their marvelous palace, but nothing is said about the life of these two representing members of the Venetian nobility, Count Paolo Di Padovani and Countess Lucia. The idea of the plot is doubtless intriguing, but it is very strange the fact that these Counts, who are courageous enough to go against the law looking for the help of a Jewish midwife, do not suspect of their greedy brothers; more: while they are dinning with Hannah, Jacopo and Nicolò, suddenly they have to leave their home to go to Ravenna and, curiously, they ask Hannah for watching over their son, that same precious son who came to life in extreme circumstances. How could this be possible, if Count Di Padovani is so worried about his son's life and about the family inheritance? It is not explained. Moreover, the Counts are too good to be true.

Going back to Hannah for a moment, there is a historical device which deserved more attention in the novel: her birthing spoons. This detail does not go unnoticed, because it is the rudimental invention of the current forceps. The birthing spoons are only mentioned in a chapter in which the narrator is remembering how Hannah invented them, as a flashback; it would have been better if the reader could read a scene dedicated to this moment which in the history of medicine was so important. Anyway, it seems that the author suggests that Venetian midwives may have used this kind of birthing aid at that time.

In addition to the men of the Venetian nobility there is Isaac, Hannah's Jewish husband. His story is not developed as his wife's one. The narrator says that he is a merchant, but nothing is known about his activity. The only thing that the reader knows is that Isaac is a prisoner on Malta, but his story moves too fast in the novel. It would be interesting to go deeper in his permanence in the convent of Sister Assunta, or see his life of captivity under the rough Joseph for a longer time, or to know more about his growing relationship with Gertrudis. Almost all his vicissitudes keep on superficially.

Hannah's story is much more developed than Isaac's, and it captures the reader's attention until the first half of the book; the second part seems to contain too much elements concentrated in too few pages. The rhythm grows too rapidly and this undermines what is essential for a reader to believe a story: one example more, is the case of Tarzi, the woman who Hannah meets on the boat to Malta. It is not believable that a woman just known on a boat allows that experiments of contraception were made on her body so easily. This scene could be the author's intention to talk about methods of contraception which maybe were used in that period of time, or this could be just a hint about the idea of rudimental contraception itself. The fact is that despite of whatever good intention, the narration is not believable but predictable.

Above all, the events follow too fast and appear not well defined; last but not least, the end is very predictable: all the pieces of the puzzle settle easily and too quickly. There is an abyss between the first part of the novel and the second; the reader has the sensation that events slide too quickly, that the plot so well organized in the first part, seems to have too many details and stories which need to be ended in a rush.

These are negative connotations, but it is undeniable that *The Midwife of Venice* could be the story for a movie for its setting and characters; it has all the stuff set designers and costume makers dream of: palaces, filthy canals, depressing ghettos, colorful courtesans and capricious nobles.<sup>99</sup>

Venice is part of the setting, but is also part of the cast. There are not much descriptions of the city, but what Roberta Rich chose in her novel, is enough to make the city a character, because she is the mirror of dispositions, characters and events. Surely, Venice presents the most remarkable ones; the isle of Malta has any redeeming quality: her characters are not thick and have not good qualities in general. Joseph is very rough and would like to send Isaac to death surely; Sister Assunta seems to be compassionate, but is only a superficial impression, because she shows her piety towards Isaac only to have an infidel converted to Christianity; Gertrude is a beautiful woman and an artist, but she comes to compromise only because of her interest for Isaac. The stony, bleached landscape of sun-baked Malta complements the earthy language and dry humor as well as the straightforward problems and uncomplicated world view of the characters there.<sup>100</sup>

More, it is evident that the port of Malta is the most visited by ships coming from Venice for replenishing provisions in the novel, but maybe it is so depicted to emphasize the fictional strategy. Valletta was surely an important point for economic trade, but there was another port and another island: Crete, at the time known as the Kingdom of Candia, which was considered the very way to the East and, last but not least, was ruled by Venice. It is also curious that Hannah, on the ship to Valletta, knows an Ottoman family who is travelling on a Venetian ship; there is no sign of

---

<sup>99</sup> Saima Hussain, <http://www.dawn.com>

<sup>100</sup> <http://romanticarmchairtraveller.typepad.com>



discrepancy between her and Tarzi, but history teaches that one century later (with respect to the time of the narration) the Ottomans conquered the island of Crete. It is evident that there is not awareness of these contrasts nor tension between the characters.

It was already mentioned that Hannah's story is more developed than Isaac's. There are difference also between what they have to face; Hannah lives adventures full of risk, while Isaac is mostly worried about basic necessities such as food and shelter. There is a strong contrast between the two stories and between the two settings. Venice is more sophisticated and there are many insidious perils mirrored in the way of living of the Di Padovani family and in the difficulties that Hannah keeps on facing once out of the Ghetto Nuovo. Venice is surely more realized socially and physically than the isle of Malta where the reader finds secondary characters, ordinary people, streets without name and covered with dust.

Certainly, the author managed to focus on important aspects of Venice: her magnificence reflected on her palaces, the difference of the structure of the ghetto in comparison to the rest of the city, in which there are high, simple and poorly projected constructions where Jews were confined to live and also the terrible plague which infested houses and canals with death. The passages describing this moment of Venetian history show the scary and dirty side of the city, aspects that add suspense and threat.

Even though the author shows the most important aspects of the city of Venice with regard to its narrative purposes, she could have devoted more space to the description of the city and make it even more realistic. In that sense, Sarah Dunant gives the reader more pictures of Venice; her characters have a description of Venice according to every

disposition, and this happens throughout the novel. In the *Courtesan* the mix of historical and descriptive details are more studied than in *The Midwife*, a novel which fulfills the purpose of Historical fiction, that is transporting the reader to another time and place, but that has less to say compared to the *Courtesan*: this novel has more to say and in a richer way.

# **UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF *THE MIDWIFE OF VENICE***



## **VENICE AND THE TURKS**

*'Promptness and a ready capture of occasions': for Venice in the aftermath of Lepanto, that could mean but one thing. Their glorious victory must be followed up at once. The Turk must be given no rest, no time to catch his breath; he must be pursued and brought to battle again before he had had a chance to repair his shattered forces and while the allies still had their forward impetus. This was the message that the Venetians now propounded to their Spanish and papal allies; but their arguments fell on deaf ears.*

J. J. Norwich<sup>101</sup>

The novel *The Midwife of Venice* is set in the XVI century, in particular in 1575. For the city of Venice this was not a period of particular achievement because her maritime and commercial power was sharply declining; to better understand the reasons of this, it must be explained the Venetian-Turkish relationship.

Venice's military, political and commercial expansion to the Levant can be divided into three periods. The first, in which the city prepares her dominion on the east with the fourth Crusade and by conquering

---

<sup>101</sup> J. J. Norwich, *A History of Venice*, Penguin Books, 2012, p.489

Constantinople in 1204; the second, in which there is the creation of the Venetian myth of the freedom from the byzantine inheritance after the conquest of Constantinople which sees a supremacy that lasts almost two centuries, despite of rivalries with Genoa; and the third one which sees Venice declining because of the Turkish victory on Greek people and the conquest of Constantinople, which sees the slow withdrawal of Venetian troops and the losing of her territories in the next wars.

In Turkish imaginary there was a legend in which there was a powerful and fantastic country to be reached, the one of the *red apple* or of the *golden globe*: sultans always identified it with Italy. Obviously, in the west world, Venice was the nearest city to the Ottoman Empire, with expansionist views, and that was considered the first enemy that had to be defeated. As a matter of fact, sultan Bayezid II closed all the doors that the Republic had opened in his territory: Zara, Lepanto, Corone, Modone, Malvasia, Navarino, Naples of Romania; more, he ordered that Venetian people living in Constantinople had to be sent to prison. It is only in 1503 that peace is reached, but henceforth the Venetian empire was reduced to a number of scattered isles in the Aegean sea, where the Turks are almost undisputed rulers.

The peaceful coexistence between Venice and the Turks lasts until the years 1537-1540. It is in 1537 that the Turkish fleet besieges Corfù, a fertile isle set in the south of the Adriatic sea and that was, above all, a strategic point to Venice, after she lost the city of Modone; Corfù was heavily bombarded, but the isle was saved also thanks to the bad weather conditions. As a consequence, the Turks attacked all the other isles of the Venetian empire in the Greek archipelago and this plunder leads to the 8<sup>th</sup> February 1538, day in which all Christian Princes signe and subscribe the Holy Alliance against the Turks. Shortly after, Doge

Gritti died; he was the only one who was capable of dealing with the Turks. The economic and political situation of Venice was precarious. It is the reason why the Republic is disposed to give her possessions to save the peace, the free trade of flour, her private lands in the Aegean sea and to abolish the 10% tax on the Syrian trade.

This peace grants thirty years of agreement between Venice and the Turks, even though there are some encroachments usually for pirates and many complaints for smugglers. But it is with Selim II that Venice is in peril again, because he thinks that she owns, in the Mediterranean sea, two isles which are too strategic and too dangerous for his fleet: Cyprus and Candia. There, the Venetians can still have economic power, be a shelter for Christian pirates and control sea routes. The war of Cyprus is the only Venetian-Turkish conflict that is officially announced by an Ottoman messenger who takes the ultimatum of a Sultan to a Doge, the only one which had a war declaration in 1570. The imperial letter asks the spontaneous assignment of the isle of Cyprus, but the Venetian senate considers as indecorous this kind of disposition and declares war after an immediate refusal. In 1571, feasted in Venice and in all Europe, there is the victory in Lepanto. Particularly since then, the Republic does everything in her power to hold the League together and persuade her fellow-members to join her in a total offensive stopping only at Constantinople itself, but Venice is deserted by her own allies, knowing well that to continue the war alone will be to invite new Turkish invasions of the Adriatic and the seizure of Crete and her last stronghold in the Levant, she has no choice but to accept the terms which are offered her; on 3 March 1573 the treaty is signed, and Venice has also to pay 300,000 ducats over three years and to renounce all her claims to Cyprus. It is as if the battle of Lepanto has never been won. *It was indeed. In spite of all*

*the jubilation, the cheering and the shouting, and the building up of the great Lepanto legend that still persist today, the truth is that one of the most celebrated naval battles ever fought proved to be of no long-term strategic importance whatever*<sup>102</sup>.

It is with sultan Murad II that Venice renewed the peace with the Turks in 1575, which lasts until the war of Candia (Crete), in 1645-1669. Now, Venice is not more a maritime and trading power: the isle of Crete is not sufficient to grant political and commercial dominion; more, trade routes are not just those of the Mediterranean seas because of the discovering of America, so spices, sugar, dye products, textile works and silks, are not more considered as the principal trading products.

In 1576-77, Venice is a very different city. A city in which the cheering and the shouting has died, giving place to a strange and sinister silence. The crowds are gone from St. Mark's square, around the Rialto bridge and the Merceria, the shops are closed and shuttered. While her fleet is licking her wounds, unfortunately, the Plague has struck in a city that begins to take the air of a desert.

---

<sup>102</sup> J. J. Norwich, *A History of Venice*, Penguin books, 2012, p. 491.

**BETWEEN FICTION AND**  
**HISTORY:**  
**THE MIDWIFE OF VENICE**



**HANNAH AND GIOVANNA: PRIDE, PREJUDICE  
AND INQUISITION**

*Sir, how can any good come of an infidel attending a birth?*<sup>103</sup>

Giovanna

*Come. Breathe, child. A life of ease awaits you. Fine clothes, private tutors, loving parents, a palazzo on the Grand Canal. All that is required of you is to suck air into your little body and then exhale it. Try. It is not so difficult.*<sup>104</sup> – *May your screams be heard all the way to the Piazza San Marco.*<sup>105</sup>

Hannah

In the XVI century there was a different kind of epidemic, but with the same proportions; it was against women of all ages, who generally were midwives, but also women who had a certain knowledge of herbs and cured with teas and that probably, had a psychological disposition that was unusual among ordinary people. For these reasons, they were considered witches, and so punishable for witchcraft. Women have

---

<sup>103</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, Ebury Press, 2011, p. 74.

<sup>104</sup> Ibidem, p. 78.

<sup>105</sup> Ibidem, p. 79.

always been the preferred prayers of the Inquisition, but even other Venetian Magistrates revealed a deep rage against them.

In 1537 the magistracy of the *Esecutori contra la Biastemma* (officers against blasphemy) started to be interested also in courtesans over the rape of girls who were younger than fourteen-years-old, the violating of pressing laws, the clandestine marriages, gambling. Among all these mansions, the Officers applied the directives of the Council of Ten about harlots. Especially during the XVI century, they issued a series of severe sentences in particular against prostitutes: ban, the shame, the imprisonment for life, the cut of their tongue. The ban was also for those women who transformed their houses in brothels; the cut of the tongue was for those ones who had not complied with the order to close them.

Next to the competences of the *Esecutori* there were other two institutions: the *Provveditori* and the *Provveditori alle Pompe* who, for example, in 1598 ordered that prostitutes could not have their heads covered with white silk handkerchiefs as did the bride or those who were entering the convent.

It was not sufficient: to persecute women, harlots and courtesans, there were also the so called *Provveditori alla Sanità* who, between the years 1550 and 1563, condemned forty courtesans more or less<sup>106</sup> because they went to church and to school during festivities, because they rented forbidden garments, or because they could be pimps of little girls. More, they had organized a school of women, in which there was the teaching of a certain number of magic and propitiatory rites.

It was common belief that these women and also midwives were worshippers of Satan, that they were used to meet and adore him, and to receive instructions for evil spells; they also were believed to indulge in

---

<sup>106</sup> V. Palumbo, *Veronica Franco la cortigiana poetessa*, Edizioni a Nordest, 2011, p. 199.



any kind of orgies. It was a general psychosis not only in Venice, but in the whole Europe. The women accused of witchcraft were ordinary ones who, thanks to their fame of being accomplices to the devil, tried to earn some money from people who went to them who used magic arts.

Exemplary is the case of the famous courtesan Veronica Franco: glory, many friendships, many relationships with powerful and cultural men, but all this was not sufficient: she was processed by Inquisition and risked her own life. She was charged because she did not go to church, she did not observe the fasts; she made believe to be married, to be engaged to someone, even also to be widow, just to wear the jewels and clothes that courtesans were not allowed to wear. She was accused by the teacher of her son, by her cook, a servant and two neighbors. According to the teacher, Veronica had transformed her home into a gambling house and had paid her servants to buy their silence. Another reason was that Veronica practiced witchcraft to make men fall in love. She would appeal also to magic to find some little silver scissors and a little golden-covered book. Her process took place in 1580. During the process, Veronica told that there was a woman in Venice called *la Greca* (the Greek), who kept the head of a dead man in a basin, and with it she practiced magic enchantments. This woman was probably Virginia Greca who once lived in Venice, in campo Santa Margherita and who was processed by the Inquisition in 1592, charged with heresy. This could be a parallel with the Courtesan, in which there is a woman called *la Draga* who is known for her magic practice and her knowledge of herbal remedies. Anyway, with regard to Veronica, she managed to save herself and to get absolved, thanks to the humility of her answers and thanks to the powerful people she knew.

Talking about Shabbat, there is a passage in the novel in the second chapter, where the author refers to it, and even though Hannah, the main character, invents something very useful to human nature, it was seen as witchcraft and she risked her own life, just as in reality it happened to many women: *One Shabbat she was ladling beet soup, so hot and steaming it made her hair spring into tiny curls. The silver soup ladle in her hand, with a concave belly and a curved handle, plunged deep into the tureen. She dropped the handle when it grew too hot and it slid along the side of the bowl, coming to rest against the curve of the bottom. An idea took shape in her mind. She took an identical spoon down from the cupboard, and with her hands still stained red from the beets, she crossed one spoon over the other to form the letter X. Such an instrument, she thought, could bring a child's head farther down the birth passage and hasten deliveries. She made a rough sketch, with the silversmith then used to fashion the instrument, sculpting the bowl of the birthing spoon more deeply than that of an ordinary spoon and making the handles longer. A hinge held the two spoons together in the middle, so that they could be opened and closed like a pair of scissors. At first, she had practiced in private, extracting onions from the cavities of raw chickens. When her dexterity improved, she used them at confinements, draping a bedsheet over the mother's bent knees so she could not see, and shoos all the other women from the room. Midwives were burned as witches for less cause than this, so Hannah knew she must be circumspect.*<sup>107</sup> It is clear that in the novel, Hannah invents a rudimental forceps. This instrument was invented by an obstetrician surgeon called Peter Chamberlen in London, in 1572. The forceps was kept by Chamberlen as "family secret" for several generations. It was transported

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

in a special container and covered with a sumptuous drape. In the eighteenth century the secret was revealed and the forceps began to be used freely, causing disasters when it was used by inexperienced hands. Beside this historical notions, the fact is that Rich shows a reality of secrets and peril for those women who contributed to medicine with their knowledge.

When Hannah goes to Countess Lucia's chamber there is Giovanna, the Counts' housekeeper. This is a very different kind of female figure and to Hannah she is a danger. At the time of her arrival to the Counts' palace, Countess Lucia is almost dying, and Giovanna asks her to use the crochet, imploring to save her *poor mistress*<sup>108</sup>. The crochet was a sharp hook used to gouge a hole in the anterior fontanel for the infant's head so that a midwife could insert her fingers through the fractured skull and pull, thus extracting the dead fetus<sup>109</sup>, an instrument that Hannah refuses to use because she promised she would obey to the Count's admonition to save the child above all. There is a consideration more for the fact that Hannah does not take Giovanna's advice: killing the mother to save the child would be to go against the Count's orders and saving the Countess by using the crochet would mean she could expect neither protection from the law nor her promised fee. The housekeeper is really a problem to her, because she could interfere in her work with all her prejudices. So, *better to have Giovanna out of the room Hannah thinks*<sup>110</sup>.

*Sir, how can any good come of an infidel attending a birth?* This is how Giovanna sees and considers Hannah. Giovanna is public opinion. Giovanna is Christianity. Giovanna is The prejudice. Hannah is a Jewish

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

<sup>109</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

<sup>110</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

midwife, a double dangerous blade of the same knife: Jews are infidels, Jewish midwives are witches adoring the devil and are to be sent to death immediately. When Giovanna is updating the Count about the progressing childbirth, she tells the sentence mentioned before: *how can any good come of an infidel ?* Naturally, midwives were not exclusively Jewish women, but this aspect makes the situation worse. Many are the references Rich does in the novel, where Giovanna considers Hannah as a disbeliever, as a witch, as a minister of Satan with diabolical powers, just as people really thought of Jews and of midwives at that period of the XVI century. There is a passage, in chapter six, where Hannah reminds of a Sephardic woman named Ezster, from the Ghetto Vecchio, who is walking home from buying fish at the docks when she hears the screams of a little girl who had wandered away from her nursemaid and fallen into the Rio della Sensa. The child is unable to swim, panics and chocks on the filthy canal water, crying. Ezster grabs an oar from an empty gondola and fishes the child out, and then leads the sobbing girl back home; the next day the girl was dead of canal fever, her mother was convinced that Ezster was a witch and denounces her to the Inquisition. The woman is taken away by two men from the office of Inquisition and disappeared. This is an eloquent example that the author gives about the groundless charges which were made towards Jewish women like Hannah.

*Giovanna stared at Hannah as though she had seen a witch... Hannah could not more stop the gossiping tongue of such a woman than the shochet could staunch the flood of blood from a slaughtered lamb<sup>111</sup> .* Here Hannah is using her birthing spoons because they are the last thing left to save the Countess and her child, but Giovanna is there, next to her, because she needs a support in this difficult and delicate moment, where

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibidem, p. 76.

the Countess legs have to be supported. The housekeeper's prejudices are too much deeply rooted in her mind so she cannot see the miracle that Hannah is making: *Giovanna watched as Hannah worked the spoons up Lucia's passage. 'Is she not dying fast enough for your liking?' ... God may forgive you, but I will not. Neither will my master*<sup>112</sup>.

The practice of the forceps, which was in use since 1573, was not accepted by Giovanna because Hannah is not a doctor, but is an infidel Jew chargeable with witchcraft. She is not and never will be grateful to Hannah for saving the life of her mistress; her mind is totally clouded with prejudices, too involved with the common feeling of the Venetian society: *The Contessa will live, God be praised, but her child was brought into the world with an implement of the devil*<sup>113</sup>. It was common practice to call the *Prosecuti* and denounce women as Hannah which were then processed and also killed for actions which were considered as crimes: *The birthing spoons, lying on the end of the bed in plain view, had left tiny red marks on either side of the babe's forehead. It would do her no good if Giovanna snatched her spoons and presented them as evidence to the Inquisition. She grabbed them and thrust them, sticky with mucus and blood, into her bag.*<sup>114</sup> It is just Hannah herself who defends her position and that of all the women who are midwives, Jewish or Christian, and make the same practices; rightly said, it is not a fault being a midwife, nor a Jew: *Why should a midwife not have her tools? Does not the farrier have his nails and hammer? The glassblower his borsella, his pinchers? My spoons are no more an instrument of the devil than those*<sup>115</sup>. But Giovanna expresses another Christian concept of that time: life is God's gift, and none can interfere with it, nothing can be used to force God's plans: *Birthing is*

---

<sup>112</sup> Ibidem, p. 76.

<sup>113</sup> Ibidem, p. 83.

<sup>114</sup> Ibidem, p. 79-80.

<sup>115</sup> Ibidem, p. 82.

*God's work. We are here only to cut the cord and encourage the mother, not to shove God aside and take over the job ourselves*<sup>116</sup>

## **JESSICA, THE COURTESAN**

*Why are you dressed as a page?*<sup>117</sup>

Hannah

*I am a courtesan, not a whore*<sup>118</sup>

Jessica

Jessica is a character that the same author would have liked to keep alive in the plot<sup>119</sup>. She is Hannah's younger sister, but they have in common only their birth, origin and family, because they have completely different vision of life and temperament. Thanks to her, it can be understood much of that part of Venetian folklore which was so famous also in Europe: just think of Henry II of France, when he came to Venice to discuss the political situation of the Republic against the Turks, and who asked to see some of the famous Venetian courtesans, and among all he had in front of him, he chose the renown Veronica Franco.

The reader knows Jessica in the eighth chapter, when Hannah is coming back home from the dinner at the Di Padovani's palace and she hears a voice, thinking that maybe the dense fog is deceiving her; more, she had not slept in hours, fatigue blurred her vision and addled her mind. But when she hears the voice again, louder and closer, she recognizes it

---

<sup>116</sup> Ibidem, p. 84

<sup>117</sup> Ibidem, p. 117.

<sup>118</sup> Ibidem, p. 118.

<sup>119</sup> [www.robetarich.com](http://www.robetarich.com)

was her sister's, but she cannot believe her eyes: the voice was identical too Jessica's, but the singing figure is a young boy dressed in a sapphire-coloured waistcoat, embroidered breeches and a cap of blue velvet, with a mask on his eyes and nose. But it is not a boy, it is Jessica.

Both the sisters have their recognizable disguise. Hannah wears a blue cioppà (a loose fitting dress) with a scarf over her hair and Jessica a typical male clothing; this is the device which introduces Hannah to her sister's new world. Jessica is returning from a party at a palazzo on the Grand Canal as was usual at that time. These parties were for Christians, not for Jews, and were costume parties where people dressed like characters from the Commedia dell'Arte (*Pulcinello, Pedrolino, Harlequin, Brighella*<sup>120</sup>), and that Hannah does not understand well: she thinks they are masquerades. Here Jessica introduces her sister to the world of courtesans: *Not exactly...I was the only woman in costume. Some older men adore young boys. Many prefer them to pretty young women...The men fear the sodomy laws*<sup>121</sup>. In the XVI century, Venetian courtesans wore in a dual tactic manner; many scholars<sup>122</sup> explain that it was for professional purposes, because they could make sexual performances as *men* and as women. Rich uses Jessica's words to demonstrate that sodomy was not only an homosexual practice at that time: trustful are Pietro Aretino's sonnets and Giulio Romano's engravings, as it has been mentioned in the chapters dedicated to Dunant's *In the Company of the Courtesan*. Even though it was widespread, sodomy was considered a serious sin, punished very hardly; but courtesans did not desist in offering this kind of service. It must be added, however, that if a courtesan attracted a guest dressed as men, they risked less to be arrested by the

---

<sup>120</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, p. 117.

<sup>121</sup> Ibidem, p. 117.

<sup>122</sup> V. Palumbo, *Veronica Franco la cortigiana poetessa*, Edizioni a Nordest, 2011, p. 76.

police. In the novel, Jessica wears a mask to cover her face, but courtesans hide their identity also under a hairstyle that was called a *fungo* (mushroom). If the police discovered courtesans dressed as men, they could be arrested; this could be the reason why they dressed in this dual way.

Even though the great Titian painted her seriously dressed, in her Lettera XXII, the courtesan Veronica Franco wrote to her mother and it comes to evidence that she despised the traditional dress of courtesans, and that it was a certainty that courtesans had to be competitive and offer something different from simple prostitutes. In the novel, Jessica explaining it to her sister, exemplifies the concept: *"I am a cortigiana, Hannah. You must have heard. There are thousands like me in Venice competing for the same wealthy protectors. We all need a speciality, and dressing as a handsome youth in tight breeches is mine". She hooked her thumbs in the lapels of her satin jacket and gave a little bow*<sup>123</sup>. With regard to the punishment, it is Jessica, again, who tells about the risks: *"I permit men to have the pleasure of the experience without the commission of the crime. The penalty for sodomy is fifty ducats for the firstcharge, if you are a cittadino. If you are noble, then it is..."* Jessica made a sweeping motion with two fingers across her throat.<sup>124</sup>

Sodomy was considered worse than a disease. In the XV century there was the spreading of syphilis which was a terrible death sentence, but sodomy was something even more unpleasant, something worse that people had to defend themselves from. This was the idea of the Council of Ten; during XV century it was founded the Council of the Sodomites which met once a week, there were also two patricians for each parish of Venice, who patrolled. At the time of the beginning of the career of

---

<sup>123</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, p. 118.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 118.



Veronica Franco, in 1564, there were proposals of getting punishments worst: the burning of alive people, beheading; but this did not arrested the practice, on the contrary, it became more visible and more visible was also homosexuality. Here came the reactions of prostitutes who answered by displaying their breasts (of this time are the toponyms *Ponte e Fondamenta delle Tette*).

*You can find me listed in the Catalogo, should you care to look – my address, prices, and specialities – along with all the other honest courtesans in Venice. There is even a flatter miniature of me in tempera*<sup>125</sup> are the words which impress Hannah. But it was History: il *Catalogo de tutte le principal et più honorate cortigiane de Venetia*, the sixteenth-century catalog which included two hundred and ten<sup>126</sup> of the most famous courtesans of the second half of the sixteenth century. Jessica and Fiammetta of the *Courtesan* are both members of it. In this catalogue there were also the name of the courtesans' pimps; it was not only a guide for male users but was also an amusement for those of them who were used to read.

As Fiammetta Bianchini was not simply a whore, even Jessica affirms her truth to her sister: *I'm a courtesan, not a whore, Jessica responded. I do not stroll the calli of Castello letting men take me against the wall of the Alms House*<sup>127</sup>; Jessica is a cortigiana Honesta, the category of beautiful, wealthy, cultured women who amused, pleased and entertained high-class men of nobility, but also of churchmen. Papal courtesans lived in luxury, not much less that noble women. They had something more: differently from them, courtesans knew arts, music and also poetry, wrote diaries and play instruments. They were trained to

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibidem, p. 118.

<sup>126</sup> V. Palumbo, *Veronica Franco la cortigiana poetessa*, Edizioni a Nordest, 2011, p. 94.

<sup>127</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, p. 118.

entertain distinguished and exigent noblemen, they were witty talkers: this was the reason why they were very wanted as guests in parties. They had to pay regularly and the incomes were used by the church to realize public works; two examples to understand better, are Borgo Pio, in Rome, built by Pope Pio IV, the restoring of the Ponte Rotto. With the tributes imposed to the courtesans, Pope Leone X built via Ripetta.

In chapter fourteen Hannah goes to Jessica's home. She can see that her house is pretty, with elegant arches in Istrian marble and fine stone tracery which gives a lacy appearance to the façade. On the second floor the façade was a bas relief of the Annunciation. From this description the reader knows that the house of a *cortigiana honesta* was embellished, had a refined taste, and was very accurate. The author adds another device: Jessica has a maid, a servant. The *cortigianae honestae* had a beautiful house with also servants, a clear sign of a high condition, that, however, could change at any moment. Anyway, even though courtesans were *honestae*, and did their performances to rich and often cultured noblemen, in wonderful houses, in precious beds, with sumptuous clothes, their condition was however humiliating. In her Letter XII, Veronica Franco gives a perfect portrait of this condition: *Troppo infelice cosa e troppo contraria al senso umano è l'obbligiar il corpo e l'industria di una tal servitù che spaventa solamente a pensarne. Darsi in preda a tanti, con rischio d'esser dispogliata, d'esser rubata, d'esser uccisa, ch'un solo un dì ti toglia quanto con molti in molto tempo hai acquistato, con tant'altri pericoli d'ingiurie e d'infermità contagiose e spaventose; mangiar con l'altrui bocca, dormir con gli occhi altrui, muoversi secondo l'altrui desiderio, correndo in manifesto naufragio sempre della facoltà della vita: qual maggior miseria? Quai ricchezze,*

*quai commodità, quai delizie posson acquistar un tanto peso? Credete a me: tra tutte le sciagure mondane questa è l'estrema*<sup>128</sup>.

In the novel, Jessica is satisfied of her social status, because she has reached a certain economic independence, in a way. But comparing her condition to that of her sister, she is unsatisfied, and this is the sense of Veronica Franco's letter. Hannah is much in love with her husband who married her just for love and without dowry. Even though *Jessica sat in the glow of dozens of candles in front of a mirror while her lady's maid arranged her hair in curls, (...) her skin was like the velvety skin of a peach*<sup>129</sup>, had her hair secured with a pearl on a silk thread, even though she had her skin painted with creamy paste over her face, collarbones and décolletage<sup>130</sup> until her breasts and pinched drops of belladonna into her eyes to dilate her pupils to make her eyes even darker, she could not have the kind of love that had her sister. Courtesans spent very much of their time in makeup, they dyed their hair blond or red and styled them with braids. Their buttons were made of gold, their skirts were made of silk.

---

<sup>128</sup> V. Franco, *Lettere*, Salerno editrice, 1998.

<sup>129</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, p. 191.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 197.

## **ISAAC, THE LEVANT AND SISTER ASSUNTA**

*Isaac Levi had gambled with fate and lost.*<sup>131</sup>

The narrator of *The Midwife*

*The adornment of a man's face is his beard*<sup>132</sup>

Torah

*Let me explain the true reason for buying you*<sup>133</sup>.

Sister Assunta

Isaac is Hanna's husband. He is interested on trading and, as many other Venetian merchants who lived at that time of history, he risks his money to open trade routes between Venice and the Levant. In XVI century this kind of trade was so lucrative that huge profits, sometimes upwards of three thousand percent, could be gained from buying and selling spices, timber and printer silk. In the novel, Isaac borrows heavily and buys a warehouse full of silk to resell in Constantinople, planning to buy spices with the profits and sell them in Venice.

In his intention of trading silk and spices, Isaac does not consider that his ship can be fired and that mercenaries in the pay of the Knights of Malta can put an end to his projects. The Order of the Knights of Saint John, also known as Order of Saint John, Order of Hospitallers, Knights Hospitaller, were among the most famous of the Roman Catholic military orders during the Middle Ages<sup>134</sup>. They have a tradition which started as Benedictine hospital order in the first half of the XI century in Jerusalem and that after the first Crusade, changed in a religious order of Christian

---

<sup>131</sup> Ibidem, p. 41.

<sup>132</sup> Ibidem, p. 45.

<sup>133</sup> Ibidem, p. 61.

<sup>134</sup> [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

chivalry with its own statute which was entrusted with the care and defense of pilgrims who were directed to the Holy Land. In the city of Valleta, capital of the isle of Malta, Christians, Jews and Muslims were cured without distinction. This order lasted until 1798, year in which Napoleon conquered the isle; they had few ships, but they were very expert navigators, *screaming and brandishing swords and muskets*<sup>135</sup>.

The author gives a reliable description of those men, of those Knights who succeeded in defending their lands from the rapaciousness of the Ottomans. As Rich underlines, they called themselves Knights, but *they were little more than pirates*<sup>136</sup> who grew rich through crimes sanctified in the name of the Holy Crusade. Isaac's ship, *la Dogaressa*, while sailing, is attacked by *twenty of brutes, savage, hairy men with swinging crucifixes and hearts bursting with hatred for the infidels and who greed for his rich Venetian cargo*<sup>137</sup>. He is captured by them and made prisoner in Valleta, their stronghold that Charles V of Spain had bestowed on them in exchange for their protecting the archipelago against the infidel Turk. The fact is that the Knights, bewitched by their victories, used the pretext of defending the isle of Malta to prey not only upon the infidel ships of the Ottomans, but also on Christian ships as well, *seizing cargo and enslaving all on board...merchant or servant, woman or child*<sup>138</sup>.

Isaac is considered as an infidel, and sails on a ship which has an interesting cargo. Undoubtedly, the author puts into fiction what was history: Isaac is a Jew and as other Christians and Muslims, he is an infidel who has to be punished and who can provide some profits; that is the reason why the Knights, in the novel, do not kill him nor his friends

---

<sup>135</sup> Ibidem, p. 41.

<sup>136</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.

<sup>137</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.

<sup>138</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.

and travel companions. They are kept prisoners until they will *be sold to the highest bidder at the slave auction in the main square*<sup>139</sup>. For Isaac there is only one hope left: that news of his captivity arrive to Venice, in which there was the so called Parnassim dos Cautivos who could negotiate for his ransom (*The Society for the Release of Captives in Venice is funded by a levy that Venetian Jews pay according to the value of their cargos. They will ransom me.*)<sup>140</sup>

This organization collected money from the Jewish community that paid tribute regularly to negotiate the ransom of any community member who could be captured and made prisoner. *Delicate and tender hands. Neither callused nor brawny. He is a merchant or a gentleman and will fetch a good ransom for the Knights*<sup>141</sup> is the comment of one of them, while observing Isaac's aspect, hands, teeth and body accurately. There is a device in Isaac description which cannot be unobserved: his beard. When the auctioneer is examining him, a man questions *But if he is a Jew, where is his beard?*<sup>142</sup>; the beard, therefore, is a distinctive device in a Jew, but Isaac does not have his own because one of the Knights wanted him to have it shaved to keep down the lice: as a matter of fact Isaac has ribbons of bloody gashes on his cheeks and chin. The beard is also a recognizable sign of wisdom, and a Jewish man without it is considered a not learned man. In the novel there is a passage in which the auctioneer says that *Not only is this slave (Isaac) a Jew, but he is a learned one. One who can read and write and compute.* But when the man interested to buy Isaac, Joseph, listens to these words, he asks:

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibidem, p.43.

<sup>140</sup> Ibidem, p.67.

<sup>141</sup> Ibidem, p.45.

<sup>142</sup> Ibidem, p.45.

*How do I know he is learned if he has no beard? Does not the Jew obtain wisdom from his hairy chin?*<sup>143</sup>

*The Midwife* is a novel very implied also with religion. In chapter three there is the introduction of a new character, Sister Assunta. She is a Christian nun living in a convent in Valleta, who wants to buy Isaac, competing with the rough Joseph, the man who does not want a literate man but someone to put in galley ships to the Levant.

*Do not thank me for buying you. I am not compassionate, at least not the way a nun should be. If I cannot get to heaven by being kind I will do so by righting wrongs, thus ensuring that I ascend to heaven at the proper time.*<sup>144</sup> These words of Sister Assunta display a kind of false note with regard to Christian religion; as a matter of fact, Sister Assunta will explain to Isaac the true reason for buying him: not for compassion nor for Christian charity. She explains that her parents were from Toledo in Spain, and that they were *Conversos*, that is Jews converted to Christianity. Talking about them, she defines her parents *heretics* like him, only because Jewish people were considered in that way. Isaac, knows the topic and answers *Yes, the Alhambra decree... Convert or be exiled.*<sup>145</sup> But not all Jewish people converted, many escaped and fled to Constantinople or to Venice; as a matter of fact, in the Venetian Ghetto there were many Spanish Jews, called Sephardim. The real purpose for which the nun buys Isaac is that she tried to buy Jewish slaves at the lowest price to persuade them to convert to Christendom and persuade them *from their heretical beliefs*<sup>146</sup>.

The narrator, too, expresses his disagreement with a comment that seems to materialize Isaac's thought. In this comment there is also one

---

<sup>143</sup> Ibidem, p.47

<sup>144</sup> Ibidem, p. 59.

<sup>145</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.

<sup>146</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.

historical truth; Jewish people who lived in Spain and who were obliged to convert to Christianity or who converted for a formal question to avoid the Inquisition, the so called Sephardic, were called *Marrani*. (*Sephardic Jews had been forced to convert by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, yet many of them had continued to practice Judaism in secret*<sup>147</sup>) Many of them maintained their own traditions, publicly professing Catholic ones, but remaining faithful to Judaism in private. For different reasons, there were three kinds of Marranos: one group was composed of those who, without any real attachment to Judaism, and indifferent to any form of religion, gladly embraced the opportunity to change their condition of oppressed Jews, in view of brilliant careers that they could achieve thanks to the acceptance of Christianity. They simulated the Christian faith, when it returned to their advantage, and mocked the Jews and Judaism.

The second group consisted of those who preserved as something precious the love for the Jewish faith in which they were grown. They preserved the traditions of their fathers and, notwithstanding the important positions they occupied, their good jobs, they secretly attended the synagogue and fought and suffered for the religion of their ancestors.

The third group, which was also the most numerous by far, included those who gave up to the circumstances, but in private life remained Jews and seized the first opportunity to openly affirm their true faith. They do not voluntarily brought their children to baptize them; and, if compelled to do so, when they returned back home, they mopped the point in which it was poured the water of baptism. They also did not eat pork, they celebrated the Passover and carried the oil to the synagogue.

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibidem, p. 65.



Isaac cannot accept to convert to Christianity only to have his life saved: it would not be life without his wife and, above all, his religious identity. The narrator rightly says: *Convert? To the Christians, he would be no better than a marrano, a pig rooting around for scraps. By his own people he would be seen as a traitor and a coward. The Knights had taken everything – his dignity as a free man, all of his property. Being a Jew and the hope of seeing Hannah again were all he had left*<sup>148</sup>.

The *Marranos* lived far from the ghetto, among Christians, with Christian names and clothes, even though they secretly lived observing Jewish religion. Both Jews and Christians were suspicious about them, and they were often feared and heretics. *Marrano* became, therefore, synonymous of ambiguous man. The history of the *Marranos* is also twisted with the economic history of the XVI century, when they were a kind of commercial aristocracy which was detested by the merchants who had to recognize their superiority. With the *Marranos* there was another kind of vision of the Jew: he became a kind of entrepreneur and this overtook the traditional idea of the simple moneylender or the seller of second-hand clothes. Regardless of traditions and moral principles, the *Marranos* were useful to the economic interests of the government: that is the reason why Venice accepted them in the life of the city.

Back to the novel, Sister Assunta insists in trying to convince Isaac; she even promises she would talk to the Bishop about making an exception because it was improper for a man to live in a convent: *But if you accept Jesus as your Saviour and convert.. you will live in comfort until your ransom is paid.. or would you prefer to beg in the streets of Valleta?*<sup>149</sup>. But Isaac is resolute and says *My people were slaves in the*

---

<sup>148</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.

<sup>149</sup> Ibidem, p. 63.

*land of the Pharaoh. The ancient Israelites prevailed. So shall I*<sup>150</sup>. Here the narrator, again, gives a judgement in a comment, in which there are shades of disapproval: *So this was the price of Christian compassion: she would have given him shelter and food but only if he converted*<sup>151</sup>.

Not least, a device which does not come unnoticed: Isaac asks the nun to read the Bible instead of digging turnips or minding goats, but the nun tells him that there were no books in the convent. There is little religious here, in the nun's words and thoughts. As a matter of fact, she dares to judge and define Judaism in the worst manner she is capable of. There is no respect for other religions, in particular for Judaism: *Why cling to such a ridiculous religion? That a pig is not suitable for human consumption? That I offend God if I eat a piece of cheese and meat in the same meal? That ... a woman must be cleansed each month before she can return to her husband's bed?*<sup>152</sup>. Here, Sister Assunta gives the chance to make an observation more: in the popular imagination persistently circulated the idea that the Jews were to poison the wells contaminating the water and spreading fever virus or other diseases, remaining untouched by the illness. If the first accusation was false, the second came from a proven observation: Jews lived gathered and isolated in one area of the city, the ghetto, and followed different and rigorous hygiene rules for religious reasons, and so the disease does not spread easily among them.

Another example which the author gives, is in chapter seventeen, where Isaac is talking with Hector, the man who gives him news about Venice and about his possibility to be ransomed. It is all fault of the Jews:

---

<sup>150</sup> Ibidem, p. 63.

<sup>151</sup> Ibidem, p. 64.

<sup>152</sup> Ibidem, p. 65.

*You must understand that if a sparrow falls from the sky in Venice, it is considered the fault of the Jews*<sup>153</sup>. The concept is only one: the Jews are infidels, they are guilty of anything; and with regard to this, Isaac adds another anecdote, where a woman is found dead outside the gates of the ghetto, after being violated and then murdered, but no one knew her. As a consequence, the Jews are immediately accused and *The priests exhorted the mob, 'Kill the Jews. Spill their blood'. A massacre was a certainty. The crowd was clamouring to enter the ghetto and cut off the heads of the men and disembowel the children. The Jews prepared to flee. The entire community was about to be uprooted, houses lost, businesses abandoned, the ill and elderly left behind*". Isaac paused. *"Suddenly, into the square raced a messenger. 'Do not worry, fellow Jews', he announced. 'I have wonderful news. The dead woman was Jewish*<sup>154</sup>.

Infidel. It is the adjective that best characterizes Isaac, only because he is a Jew. In chapter seven, he is called infidel three times. Giorgio, Joseph's brother, does not consider Isaac as a man who can be a useful slave to them; he only thinks: *You think my brother wants an infidel any more than you do?*<sup>155</sup>. And Sister Assunta recognizes Isaac's qualities, but it is not sufficient, because he remains, however, an infidel: *He is an infidel with a special talent*<sup>156</sup>; but before returning back to the convent, thus selling Isaac to Joseph, Sister Assunta seems to have compassion of him, and says: *Goodbye Isaac. I wish you luck. If Joseph treats you badly, and he will, come back to the convent and we will discuss the salvation of your soul. She turned and started toward the*

---

<sup>153</sup> Ibidem, p. 225.

<sup>154</sup> Ibidem, p. 226

<sup>155</sup> Ibidem, p. 108.

<sup>156</sup> Ibidem, p. 109.

docks, and calling over her shoulder, she added, Joseph, treat him gently. Even an infidel is one of God's creatures<sup>157</sup>.

In chapter seventeen continue the differences between the Christian and the Jewish worlds. Hector is explaining to Isaac a chance to save his life; the Rabbi raised the money for his ransom from private benefactors, but this was conditional upon his divorce, and this because she delivered a Christian child, disobeying him and risking the life of the entire Jewish community. Obviously, Isaac cannot bear such a thought, and even though Hector tries to convince him to divorce and then remarry Hannah, he is faithful to the laws of his religion. It is interesting the brief dialogue between the two, in which concepts and ideology are clear: "*Impossible. Under Jewish law, once divorced, a husband and wife may not remarry*" says Isaac; Hector replies: "*Your laws are designed to create unhappiness*"<sup>158</sup>.

Hector is definitely wrong: religion can also save a life. In chapter twenty-tree Isaac saves a boy who is neither his friend nor his relative, risking his own life. The narrator asks himself if this is the right thing to do, and , again, it is religion to decide: *the Torah teaches that when you kill a man you murder not only him, but all of heirs and descendants for generations to come. Was the opposite true? By saving the boy would Isaac save all of the boy's progeny? Whatever the answer to this question, Isaac could not return to his sail bag*<sup>159</sup>.

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.

<sup>158</sup> Ibidem, p. 227.

<sup>159</sup> Ibidem, p. 299.

# VENICE AND THE MIDWIFE OF VENICE



The novel starts in the Ghetto Nuovo, and the atmosphere is not that of a city which blooms or shines. It is midnight, and Venice is very dark, dirty, muggy. This description of the city will be kept during the whole novel; rather than glittering city overflowing with sensual decadence, the reader is presented with this kind of vision: *At midnight, the dogs, cats and rats rule Venice. The Ponte di Ghetto Nuovo, the bridge that leads to the ghetto, trembles under the weight of sacks of rotting vegetables, rancid fat, and vermin. Shapeless matter, perhaps animal, floats to the surface of Rio di San Girolamo and hovers on its greasy waters. Through the mist rising from the canal the cries and grunts of foraging pigs echo. Seeping refuse on the streets renders the pavement slick and the walking treacherous*<sup>160</sup>. This is the atmosphere which opens the novel, when Count Di Padovani goes to the midwife's house to ask for her help.

In chapter two, Hannah follows Count Di Padovani through the campo toward the gates of the ghetto; there is something sinister in the setting and a characteristic of the city, that is *acqua alta* (high tide), complicates things. It is a kind of frightful vision of a city in which it is difficult also make the most normal of actions, that is walking: *During the full moon, unseen currents ran in the canals, washing over the crumbling*

---

<sup>160</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, Ebury Press, 2011, p. 1.

walls and wetting the slimy steps of the ghetto. At high tide, aqua alta, the entire campo disappeared under a layer of mud. Tonight was such a night. Hannah held up her skirts...the Conte grasping her elbow to prevent her from slipping in the silt...Hannah shivered as a rat leapt into the canal, leaving greasy ripples in the water<sup>161</sup>. To make the situation even darker and sinister there is the absolute silence who reigns supreme: *Then, except for their footsteps on the cobblestones, the silence was complete*<sup>162</sup>.

At the end of chapter five, the child of Count Di Padovani is born and Hannah is looking out of the window of the bed chamber, but even though there is the full moon that radiates, as to validate the good of the childbirth, the black water of the canals seems to announce that something unpleasant is coming: *Hannah walked to the casement window, where the full moon radiated silvery arrows of light. She threw open the window, looking out at the canal below, seeing nothing but black waters*<sup>163</sup>. But at the beginning of the sixth chapter, when Hannah is leaving the palace, her sense of relief seems to reflect in Venice, and the morning light is in contrast with the dark side of the city, where she lives, the ghetto: *Dawn was gilding the city. Long fingers of sunlight illuminated the palazzo. This glowing light was so unlike the darkness of her cramped room in the ghetto, which required candles even at noon*<sup>164</sup>.

When Hannah is taking the gondola to come back to the ghetto, Venice seems to embrace her while she is collecting her thoughts for a moment: *Venice was awakening. Morning sun glinted on the water, infusing it with the luminescent colours of Murano glass. The canal was filled with boats jostling for right-of-way. Barges spilling over with apples*

---

<sup>161</sup> Ibidem, p. 21.

<sup>162</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>163</sup> Ibidem, p. 85.

<sup>164</sup> Ibidem, p. 87.

*and pomegranates, round and succulent, lumbered toward the Rialto market...The shops along the strazi teemed with early morning shoppers*<sup>165</sup>.

This kind of happy and lively image definitely changes at the beginning of chapter eight, when Hannah discovers that someone stole her birthing spoons: *Hannah pushed aside the curtain of the felze and peered out into the grey fog. The gondola was nearing the Rio di Ghetto*<sup>166</sup>. The fog gives the setting an aura of mystery and confusing: *Perhaps the dense fog was deceiving her*<sup>167</sup>.

And again fog, in chapter thirteen, when Hannah is desperately following Niccolò who escaped from the palace and who probably kidnapped Matteo, the child of the Count. This is a point of very high suspense and Venice complicates the situation with her typical weather: *Night fog was settling over Venice, making it impossible for Hannah to see if Matteo was concealed under Niccolò's cloak or if he had left the baby in the gondola*<sup>168</sup>.

The last image of the city is that of a silent Venice, where the terrible plague spreads everywhere. Hannah is trying to save her own life and that of Matteo from Jacopo's revenge, and is at Jessica's home, looking out of the window. This is the last vision of Venice, before she sails to Malta to ransom her husband and, apart of the plague, the anguish of the setting mirrors her uncertainty and fear for the future: *Venice was unearthly quiet this morning. Everyone with relatives outside the city had long since fled as the plague barges continued to overflow with corpses*<sup>169</sup>.

---

<sup>165</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.

<sup>166</sup> Ibidem, p. 115.

<sup>167</sup> Ibidem, p. 116.

<sup>168</sup> Ibidem, p. 177.

<sup>169</sup> Ibidem, p. 231.

## **PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE PLAGUE**

*Hannah saw something that made her breath catch. A barge lumbered past with bodies stacked so high that it could barely pass under the bridge. Hannah smelled the decay of bloated bodies bursting from the pressure of their own juices. The boughs of rosemary and juniper covering them did little to mask the stink. She pressed a hand to her nose.*<sup>170</sup>

Venice was very careful to the public health, many were the interventions made by the *Magistrato delle acque*, worried about dry marsh estuary which was not always regulated by the tides. There were many tanks which collected rainwater, then purified and filtered, and drinking water was freely shared by convents and hospices. Despite these attentions by the government, even when contagious diseases spread, there were epidemics of smallpox, typhoid, dysentery, whooping cough, flu as in 1588, for example.

Among all the diseases which decimated people in XVI century, feared by everyone as a biblical punishment, was the plague which compared in a discontinuous way; the one in the years 1575-76 killed forty thousand people more or less, a mortality of apocalyptic dimensions. In 1348 there was another epidemic which hit deeply also Venice, the so called *peste nera*. There were many theories about the possible causes of this kind of disease: influence of celestial bodies, climate changing, air pollution, too. But fundamental causes were considered decaying corpses, stagnant waters, rotten food; before discovering the important

---

<sup>170</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, Ebury Press, 2011, p. 200.



role of mice and fleas in the spread of the plague, it had to pass four centuries on.

To avoid and to stem the infection, the entry into the city was prohibited to those who came from infected places, it started up a security service to prevent illegal entries, ill people were denounced and sent to the so called *Lazzaretto Vecchio* (founded in 1423) and to the *Lazzaretto Nuovo* (founded in 1468), places in which these ill people were confined in the first one, and the recovered or those who were recovering, in the second one. The origin of the word *lazzaretto*, still in use throughout the world, comes from the name of the first of the two institutions, where there was a church that was dedicated to St. Mary of Nazareth.

To guarantee a certain prevention of the plague there was the action of the *Provveditori al Sal*, who were then replaced by the three *Provveditori alla Sanità*, because it was proven that they were corrupted by the relatives of the infected people: they did not want them to be sent to the Lazzaretto. More, it seems that they also sold infected clothing. The *Magistrato alla Sanità* tried to fight the plague by preventing it: together with the *Magistrato delle Acque* and the *Provveditori*, he tried to go against all that could decelerate or inhibit the ebb and flow of tides, because they were considered fundamental elements to have public hygiene, and pressed for the excavation and the maintenance of the canals of the city. He also supervised and controlled the garbage disposal and made that pigs did not circulate freely, fouling up the tanks, and that shopkeepers did not block the flow paths of the streets; he prohibited to throw garbage from the windows, controlled the freshness of fishes and vegetables, of eggs, poultry, of cheese and sausages, flour, meat sold in the marketplaces, making sure that rotten food and dead animals flesh were burned in public. The *Provveditori alla Sanità* looked for pieces of

news about health conditions of the countries which the products came from, because they could possibly be vehicle of infection and diseases as Constantinople, for example, where people from Asia came to trade unsafe goods such as leather and wool; the Magistrate sold his own officers to survey suspected places personally, so that the *Provveditori* could forbid travels and business relations with infected countries. They also put a reward for people who help the institutions by denouncing possible violations of the law and punishments for evaders.

More strict controls started from the XVI century at the Lido dock, where load and its documents were accurately supervised by the Magistrate. If it was the case of an infected ship, ill people and their things were sent to the *Lazzaretto Vecchio*, the healthy ones on the contrary, were sent to the *Lazzaretto Nuovo* in quarantine, while the ship and the load were disinfected. More, the Magistrate wrote down all the dead people in Venice, priests had to denounce deaths describing also the cause and the name of the doctors who cured those dead; it was necessary also the permission of the Magistrate for the burial, because in case of suspicious death, the *Provveditori* sent a doctor to examine the corpse. If the death was caused by the plague, the house of the infected people was isolated and who was next to the infected when he was alive, were undressed, washed with vinegar and dressed again; the evacuated house were treated with sulfur, myrrh and pitch.

Beside the *Magistrato* and the *Provveditori* there was also the Judiciary which had a great responsibility in the periods of emergency just as during the plagues of 1555-57 and 1575-77 (the years in which *The Midwife of Venice* is set); this institution was strengthened with the *Sopra Provveditori*, chosen among very influential people, and from 1598 also with the *Provveditore Generale*. But unfortunately, this was not enough to

arrest the epidemics of the plague even in the XVI century; the plague in the years 1575-77 killed also the famous painter Titian.

Since the year 1573 a terrible plague was in Constantinople and maybe this was among the causes of the diffusion also in Venice, maybe carried by a mouse circulating on the load of one of the ships. Obviously, rumors about the diffusion of the plague were a serious problem to the trade and the industry which were based in exports above all. That is the reason why the government, while trying to intervene with other effective measures to face the problem, kept on minimize the serious situation for all the period in which the plague was a real threat for the life of the city. Some doctors seemed to want to reassure and to encourage this kind of disposition, even though in 1575-76<sup>171</sup> three thousand five hundred people were already dead and mortality was growing more day by day. This minimization, together with the one of the government, was to defend the trades but also to avoid the impression of a weakening that could encourage attacks against the city, especially from the Turks. In the specific, there were doctors from Padua who denied that it was plague, and even though the majority of the Venetian doctors considered their statements with pain, disdain and indignation, the majority of the Senate welcomed and approved the conclusions of these doctors from Padua, ordering that the instructions of the *Magistrato* were changed and reduced; but the *Magistrato* kept on ordering that people who had the visible signs (buboes behind the ears, under the arms and in the groin) and the symptoms of the plague, had to be immediately isolated. Against him there was the public opinion who wanted only to be reassured and a great part of nobility who studied in Padua and who considered the Paduan doctors as a kind of oracle. According to them, the spread of the

---

<sup>171</sup> A. Zorzi, *A Venezia nel '500, il secolo di Tiziano*, F. editori, p.401.

plague was due to bad feeding and undernourishment of poor people; it was only after the death of one of the Jesuits who accompanied Mercuriale, one of the Paduan doctors, that the Senate awoke and decided to dismiss two of the Paduan doctors.

From 1575 to 1577 forty thousand people more or less, died; among the victims, the majority were common people, because noblemen tried to avoid the infection by leaving the city and often going to the countryside. Therefore, it was a problem of poor people, above all. The plague was also seen as a kind of collective punishment and in Venice invited to pray and fasting: it was essential that Communion should be done after three days of fasting, on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday it must be added that people had to go to Church barefoot and with penitential sackcloth, to recite penitential psalms and litanies to intensify the good works, the practice of forgiveness of offenses.

It was a serious difficulty to find some effective medicines or remedies to the plague; syrups, poultices, ointments, patches were only an attempt to find some relief and hope for defeating the terrible disease, but there was another problem: the staff recruitment, in a way. Prostitutes left without work and without a living, were recruited as nurses or as carriers of bodies; among the so called *pizzegamorti* there were also boatmen who often asked, in exchange for his work, for the first vacant room in a ferry to escape the brutality of the condition of that context. Among the recruited, being that a real condition of desperate need, the *Consiglio dei Dieci* allowed also prisoners, convicts and vagabonds, people who caught the chance to earn twenty ducats per months and who, meanwhile, did every kind of crime. This was also the time of charlatans: there were inventors and sellers of miraculous remedies, antidotes, of every kind of amulets that were totally ineffective or

sometimes harmful too. An example for all is the case of a Flemish man named Antonio Gualtiero who believed that infected people should recover totally if they supported a disgusting remedy: each morning, healthy people had to drink a little of their own urine, each evening eat a piece of bread soaked in vinegar with seven peaks of rue; if they felt ill, they had to urinate as much as they could and then drink as much urine as they could, and if they saw some buboes, they had to put over some shit, when buboes were broken, they had to put over urine again and then, shit again. Obviously, this was not magic, nor medicine.

It must be added that medicine groped in the dark, totally. Generally, herbs and spices were fundamental components of each medicine. Mercuriale, the Paduan doctor, gave some medicaments which were made of orange blossom, rose and borage extracts, aloes, camphor, sandalwood and saffron. Medicines were to prevent disease, not to cure them at that time, but, unfortunately, totally ineffective.

The end of the plague left a difficult inheritance. The government had to face great costs and had to diminish taxes and also had to slow down the collecting of fees; it was obliged to keep a strict economy. The population declined drastically and this led to an economic downturn, because part of the specialized manpower emigrated and many of the so called villani (peasantry) coming from Bergamo had to replace it. There were also problems for the absence of much of the aristocracy who escaped to the mainland to avoid the plague. To contrast this, the government imposed heavy taxes to the absentee and also ordered that the ones in the mainland had to be fiscally controlled and, last but not least, that healthy people had to come back to Venice immediately.

## **THE JEWS IN THE MIDWIFE OF VENICE**

*Paolo, conclude this matter. Offer her money. This is the only thing Jews understand*<sup>172</sup>.

Jacopo

Many are the references that the author makes of the Jewish world in the novel, starting from physical devices to religious beliefs in comparison with Christianity. Many are the references already mentioned, but there are others which are worthy and important. At the beginning of the novel the reader meets Vicente, whose job was to lock the gates of the ghetto at sunset and unlock them at sunrise. He is a Christian who watches over people coming to and from the ghetto, keeping the order, because Jews were not free to live a day as Christians, they had rules to respect, times to be observed.

By order of the Council of Ten, Jews were obliged to wear a scarlet hat which symbolized Christ's blood shed by the Jews. Fra' Bartholomew, a Dominican priest, had railed against Christians receiving medical treatment from Jews, considered the *enemies of the Cross*<sup>173</sup>. In the novel, Count Di Padovani goes against this rule, saying to the Rabbi that even the Doge himself had a Jewish physician, but the Rabbi is inflexible, and replies: *Such tolerance would never extend to a woman...If a Christian baby was, God forbid, to die at birth, and a Jewish midwife was*

---

<sup>172</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>173</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

attending, she would be blamed. And along with her, the entire ghetto... There are many Christian midwives in Venice<sup>174</sup>.

There is a passage in which the author reminds of another important work in which there are religious themes and comparisons: *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare. In the first chapter of *The Midwife*, Hannah does not agree with the Jewish law, in the sense that even if the woman who is in need is Christian, she suffers at the same manner of a Jewish one. She would like to go against the Rabbi, and says: *Is the suffering of a Christian woman different from the suffering of a Jewish one?*<sup>175</sup>. In *The Merchant*, Shylock has just discovered that his daughter Jessica had left home and the Jewish community to marry a gentile, after taking all the jewels and the ducats of his father. He is desperate, and in his monologue his words are very similar to those of Hannah, both denouncing a needless injustice, because apart of different beliefs or physical appearance, all men are equal, and all men need the same: *I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge (...)*<sup>176</sup>. These are the words that Hannah seems to think about when the Rabbi prohibits her to go to the Countess Di Padovani who is dying in childbirth: *Was not the flesh of a Christian noblewoman fashioned the same as a Jewess's? she*

---

<sup>174</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

<sup>175</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

<sup>176</sup> W. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Oxford, 3.I, p.161.

*thought. Did they not bleed and moan and labour in the same manner? Did they not also have tight wombs that refused to expel their contents, and babies who presented buttocks first?*<sup>177</sup> She had enticed unwilling infants from half-dead Jewish mothers; she would do the same for a Christian.

Jews were also different in their aspect: in the novel, Rich describes them as *pale and stooped from bending over their second-hand clothing, their gemstones, and their Torah*<sup>178</sup>. This is a comparison she makes with the Christian Conte Di Padovani, whose eyes are blue, his shoulders are square and his back erect.

Jews were also different and categorical. Thinking about the name Jessica, once again the reader cannot help thinking about Shylock's daughter: both Jessica of *The Merchant* and Jessica of *The Midwife* converted to Christianity to marry a gentile, Shylock would like to see her daughter dead lying at his feet, and, in *The Midwife*, the Rabbi had, in accordance with Jewish law, ordered the family to sit *shiva*<sup>179</sup>, the traditional mourning ritual for the dead. Obviously, no one in the ghetto could have contacts with her.

Different are also the place where Jews and Christians lived. Hannah is accustomed to the enclosed, rickety staircases of the ghetto which contrasted with the beautiful palace of the Christian Counts. In it, there is a fresco in brilliant colours depicting two women washing the feet of Christ; the Torah forbids the worshipping of graven images, and she compares it to her *shul*, the synagogue in the ghetto, which has a *carved wooden pulpit* where the Rabbi delivers his sermons, a *gilded Holy Ark to hold the Torah* and a *filigreed screen to separate the main floor of the*

---

<sup>177</sup> R. Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, Ebury Press, 2011, p. 23

<sup>178</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.



men's section from the women's gallery above<sup>180</sup>. Therefore, even art is different; above the bed of the Countess there is a painting of Madonna and child, a tender scene for Christians, but not for Jews because, according to their religion, only God can make another human being: *It was wickedness to attempt to emulate Him by creating graven images*<sup>181</sup>.

It is known that Christian and Jews have different eating habits. In the novel, Hannah is invited to the Di Padovani palace for a dinner that was the occasion in which she has to take back the amulet she borrowed to protect the child of the Counts. She could not conceive to see and eat meat that was not ritually slaughtered, or to eat vegetables that were cooked in the same pots that once held meat and milk. During the dinner Jacopo mocks her, as frequently happened to the Jewish people: *And what, pray tell, are we serving our honoured Jewish guest? A difficult point of etiquette, since Christians do not eat with Jews, and servants do not eat with nobility*<sup>182</sup>. The narrator goes on and confirmed that behavior like Jacopo's was often proper to Christians: *To mock Jews was a tradition in Venice. Every year at Eastertide a number of Jewish men, leaders of the ghetto, were forced to run a footrace naked through Venice, their buttocks turning red under the willow switches of the jeering crowds*<sup>183</sup>. The mocking of the Jews is also in Shylock's words, in *The Merchant of Venice*, when he talks about Antonio's behaviour: *He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation...and what's his reason? I am a Jew*<sup>184</sup>.

---

<sup>180</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

<sup>181</sup> Ibidem, p. 29.

<sup>182</sup> Ibidem, p. 148.

<sup>183</sup> Ibidem, p. 148.

<sup>184</sup> W. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Oxford, 3.I, p.161.

## **CONCLUSION**



*Desire of Venice, desire for Venice, desire in Venice*<sup>185</sup>

Tony Tanner

It is not by chance I choose to quote this sentence by Tony Tanner: here I end my work with the highest appreciation for this marvelous city. The city of art, the city as art, the greatest, richest and most important Republic in the world, a city that became central in the European imagination, silently dark, sensual, sparkling, masquerading and mysterious as only her duplicity can be.

I decided to dedicate these pages to Venice because she is unique in many ways, as she is unique also in her relationship to writing. Even though she was fading out of history in the period in which the novel was evolving its identity, the genre of Venice is, absolutely, the novel. I chose to analyze the Historical Novel in particular. I found this kind of genre definitely interesting for its characteristics; it is a narrative work set in the past, in which the author presents the atmosphere, customs and traditions, mentality and the life in general of that period, so that the reader can live them as he was actually there.

What interested me most was another aspect of this kind of novel: its very purpose, the transmission of the spirit, the description of the behavior of people, the social conditions and contexts explained through

---

<sup>185</sup> T.Tanner, *Venice Desired*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992, p.4.

realistic details and with scrupulous adherence to the facts. Interesting is also the mixture of characters who actually existed, so historical characters, and those who are work of fiction; hybridity is integral part of the Historical Novel, in which the author mixes fantasy and real facts; it is a kind of implicit promise that the author makes, because he has to put his inventive freedom at the service of the historical truth.

Anyway, even though the reader knows that he is not in front of a historiographical work, the Historical Novel is a work of fiction, and he can wonder about how much true is what he is reading. The pleasure of the reading will come by trusting the narrator's voice. Historical fiction gives the opportunity to make satire and social criticism, but also to extend the language; a historical novel must have a transparent one, so that the reader feels authenticity or a made-up language that evokes the past.

*In the Company of the Courtesan* by Dunant is a brilliant work of fiction. Dunant does not disappoint in reflecting the violence of the history of the time she is writing about, the first half of XVI century, a period of political and religious upheaval: as a matter of fact, the novel opens with the image of the beautiful and golden-haired Fiammetta being almost scalped by two Protestant women when German Lutheran soldiers sacked the Rome of Pope Clement VII. Italy was a collection of city-states, with heavy inner problems and threatened by foreign invasions, above all by France and by Spain of Carl V, the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire. Great are the description of the two most important cities of that time, Rome and Venice. With the decline of Florence, arts and renaissance culture moved to Rome under the patronage of the Pope, while Venice was still in her heyday, a Republic ruled by an oligarchy of noble families; she enjoyed a remarkable political stability and the benefits yielded by a cosmopolitan population, by the ruling of the west

Mediterranean sea and by a flourishing economy, fed by an intense trade and by economic exchanges with other countries. Venice was an irresistible destination for merchants, travelers and adventurers.

Venice, a city that really becomes a character, and maybe the main character of the novel; sparkling and dark, masquerading and intriguing, floating on a murky water by secrets and conspiracies and crossed by many gondolas which hide the lovers' sighs. Like the tide of her sea, Venice sees the rise and fall of destiny and fortune. Dunant is very passionate and knows well the time, and Venice relives all her splendor and her miseries like in a giant fresco, whose brushstrokes are made by the author's pen, the great master of the color. It is a picture that remains vivid long after the final page. The historical detail is accurate (she seems to be thirsty for accuracy), her language draws vivid pictures. Through Bucino's words, Venice becomes also the symbol of the hypocrisy, cruelty and corruption: the description of the darkness of Venice becomes representative of her impurities, under the surface of her glittering and sparkling waters on her daytime.

Thanks to the author, XVI century Venice comes to life convincingly; Dunant's skill is very clear for the fact that the real characters she puts in the *Courtesan* (Pietro Aretino and Titian, for example) are perfectly mixed to their fictional counterparts; she uses small details to give authenticity and verisimilitude to her portrayal of Renaissance Italy. Various important historical themes are presented with the right measure for the reader, with the ability of captivating his interest and keeping it vivid throughout the novel: the corruption of Roman Catholic Church, her need of reformation and the crisis for the pressing Protestant Church; art and history mixed together; the Venetian tolerance

of foreign people in general; the life of courtesans and of women considered as witches.

Roberta Rich's *The Midwife of Venice* is the other historical novel I appreciated, even though it is less accurate in details and in the narrative plot. Here there are all the main characteristics of the historical novel, and the author puts light on female nonconformity and on the theme of midwifery which was not widely described.

It is interesting for the reader to know details about Venetian history from a novel imagined after a voyage to the city of the author herself. Surely deep in research, *The Midwife of Venice* describes the story of a woman, Hannah, and her husband Isaac; but meanwhile, the author paints the difference between some areas of the same city as the Ghetto and the rest of the noble Venice, and also the difference of the Jewish and Catholic cultures and religions; Rich reproduces also the terrible threat of the plague and her descriptions of bodies, canals and alleys are impressionably realistic.

Even though the plot seems to accelerate in the second part of the novel and the end can be considered as a predictable one, *The Midwife* keeps alive the reader's attention shifting from the events happening in Venice to those ones in the isle of Malta, even though the Venetian chapters result to be more interesting, developed and captivating.; anyway, through her fiction Rich is able to put light also on the economy of Venice and her trade with the Levant, describing oriental settings and people.

Both the novels open doors to Venice. They deepen common themes in different ways, but both faithful to the purposes of the Historical Novel, painting the historical truths of the city inside that special framework that is fiction, making readers live those past times, increasing

their knowledge, staring at those creative frescoes which only gifted writers can make.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY



- Sarah Dunant, *In the company of a courtesan*, Virago Press, 2006
- Roberta Rich, *The Midwife of Venice*, Ebury Press, 2011.
- J. Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice*, Penguin Books, 2012
- A. Zorzi, *A Venezia nel '500, il secolo di Tiziano*, Fabbri Editori, 1998
- Ian G. Kennedy., *Tiziano*, Taschen, 2006
- Touring Club Italiano, *Venezia*, 1978
- Tony Tanner, *Venice Desired*, Harvard University Press, 1992
- Judith Martin, *No Vulgar Hotel*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007
- Mary Mc Carthy, *Venice Observed*, Harcourt, 1963
- Tiziano Scarpa, *Venezia è un pesce*, Feltrinelli, 2013
- Martin Garrett, *Venice, a cultural and literary companion*, Interlink Books, 2001
- Margaret Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, Penn, 2007.
- W. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Oxford University Press, 1993

- Lorenzo De' Medici, *Opere*, Laterza, 1939, vol. 2 p. 254.
- V. Palumbo, *Veronica Franco la cortigiana poetessa*, Edizioni a Nordest, 2011
- V. Franco, *Lettere*, Salerno editrice, 1998.
- M. Viallon, *Guerre e paci Veneto-turche dal 1453 al 1573*. L. Secchi Tarugi, *Guerra e pace nel Rinascimento*, 2003, Chianciano-Pienza, Italy. F. Cesati, pp. 47-60
- O. Niccoli, *Rinascimento al femminile*, Laterza, 1991.
- [www.robertarich.com](http://www.robertarich.com)
- [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)
- [www.dawn.com](http://www.dawn.com)
- [www.historicalnovelreview.blogspot.it](http://www.historicalnovelreview.blogspot.it)
- [www.literarytreats.wordpress.com](http://www.literarytreats.wordpress.com)
- [www.amazon.co.uk.com](http://www.amazon.co.uk.com)
- [www.romanticarmchairtraveller.typepad.com](http://www.romanticarmchairtraveller.typepad.com)