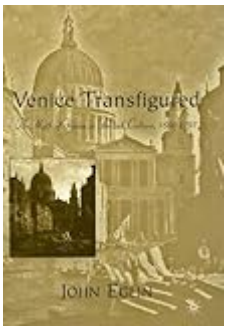
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Eglin. *Venice Transfigured: The Myth of Venice in British Culture, 1660-1797.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. 262 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-23299-3.

Reviewed by Ken Bartlett (Victoria College, University of Toronto)

Published on H-Albion (October, 2001)

Venice, as much as Rome, is an idea as much as a place. And, again like Rome, it is a complex idea, functioning on several levels throughout much of European history from at least the period of the Crusades until the present. From Shakespeare's merchant to Thomas Mann's Aschenbach, the multiple myths of Venice have been sustained. This is, moreover, visible across Europe: the elective monarchy of Poland was paralleled with the Serenissima; and every city with canals, from St Petersburg to Amsterdam, became Venices of the north. The voice of Paolo Sarpi was interpreted not just as the voice of Venetian ecclesiastical and political privilege in the face of papal ambitions but as the defender of freedom against oppression of any kind. Nowhere, however, was this complex myth more vigorously or effectively used as a political, cultural, religious, and social vocabulary than in England: this is the subject of John Eglin's book.

The author has investigated how Venice functioned as a kind of metaphor for what was happening in England in various areas of national life. He traces the significant change in this British attitude to Venice from the Restoration until the extinction of the republic by Napoleon in 1797 by seeing how Venice functioned as a kind of shorthand for certain positions in politics, culture, and society. And, Eglin comments briefly on the effect that the end of Venetian independence after 1100 years of consistent republican government had on the English imagination.

Indeed, the points of identification between England and Venice were perceived as instructive. Both were maritime, in fact imperial, powers; both enjoyed a constitution that restricted the power of the sovereign. England even experimented with republican ideas, and the glorious revolution resulted in the monarch becoming a kind of doge, a primus inter pares dependent upon his own particular *collegio* and a powerful class of hereditary nobles. Both were seen as bulwarks against papal claims, reflected in ecclesiastical institutions which were in many respects organs of the state; and both accepted that the interpenetration of culture, society, and government illustrated an advanced and healthy polity with a clear identity and sense of mission beyond its immediate borders.

All of this is traced clearly and well by Eglin both in thematic and chronological chapters. His evidence is rich, taken from a broad selection of British documents; however, there are only a few Italian or Venetian materials, materials which would have made the argument even more effective. Still, Eglin leads his reader through a number of kinds of sources, including painting (Canaletto is a major influence) and theatre (Otway's *Venice Preserved* is discussed in the context of its extremely long performance history). The ideology of the

Whigs and the vocabulary of elite politics are associated with their Venetian references; and, more specifically, the application of Venetian institutions to English circumstances made evident.

My major complaint about what is an interesting and well developed argument is that it does not set the English obsession with Venice in its roots. Had the book began more than a century earlier the text would be even more useful. I refer not just to the commercial and economic links between the two maritime states but to the long cultural and intellectual association which really begins in depth with the early sixteenth century. Venetian ambassadors resident at court provided an additional layer of understanding of Venetian life beyond the purely commercial; English students had studied in significant numbers at the University of Padua–Venetian from 1405– and returned with a profound appreciation of the republic as well as the foundations for successful careers in church and state, as Jonathan Woolfson has shown in *Padua and the Tudors* (1999). Equally, the respect for Venetian elective monarchy was found among the more interesting political thinkers of the period of the Reformation in England, many of whom had spent some time in Venice. This is particularly true of Thomas Starkey's argument in *A Dialogue Between Pole and Lupset* that England might adopt the Venetian model and select its king by election. Certainly, Starkey never printed this tract; nor are we certain that the views expressed in his name truly reflected Pole's opinions. Nevertheless, the example is clear: Venice was functioning as an exemplum of a particular kind of ideal polity well over a century before the Restoration.

There are a few other areas where the author might have sought different kinds of information. For example, the commercial and economic role of Venice in English life declined with the rise of the port of Livorno in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. Increasingly, the advantages offered to northern merchants by the Medici grand dukes (if occasionally reluctantly) made the newer port a more attractive entrepot than the Serenissima, a subject carefully documented by Pagano De Divitiis in her *English Merchants in Seventeenth Century Italy* (1998).

No one book can possibly contain all aspects of its subject; and Eglin has carefully delineated his period under investigation. His argument would have been much strengthened by earlier material from the sixteenth century, especially given the large amount of work on the subject published in the past decade. Still, what emerges from the book is a notion of Venice as metaphor in English political, social, cultural, and intellectual life, with elements of economic and military influences added as well. It brings relations between the two powers up to the end of the republic with reference to elements beyond the traditions of the Grand Tour, important though that phenomenon was. It is a good book, although one which could have gone farther and used more Italian sources, which takes an effective overview of the complex and multifaceted relationship between England and Venice during 140 critical years of their shared history.