

Shakespeare and the Ships of the Venetian Republic A Veronesa: an exact reference in *Othello*

by Noemi Magri



The 'burchio', the typical boat of Pescantina
in: D.Coltro p.106.

At the beginning of Act II, sc.i of *Othello*, in referring to the journey of the Venetian fleet sent in defence of Cyprus against the Turks, it is reported that 'another ship, of Venice,' has landed on the island: it is a 'Veronesa'¹ and has transported Cassio, Othello's lieutenant, to the island.

Commentators criticise the two references as examples of inconsistency and even error.

The present article means to substantiate that, on the basis of the dramatic action and on historical grounds, the references are correct and that only someone who had travelled in the Venetian Republic could have acquired knowledge of the type of ship called 'Veronesa', which, owing to its structure, had never sailed as far as the ports of England or Northern Europe.

The storm

Act II of *Othello* opens with the furious storm that is harassing the citadel and the port of Cyprus. Strong winds are shaking the battlements and the waves are so high that they seem to lash the clouds. Montano, Governor of the island, and two Gentlemen are watching the sea from the battlements, expecting the Turkish attack and trying to make out a sail in the distance. But they can see no ship from there: the enemy fleet is screened off by the huge waves. Montano observes that if they do not find shelter in a bay, the ships will not be able to bear the storm longer, and no one will escape drowning.

At that moment, the Third Gentleman

comes in with 'News': he announces the destruction of most of the enemy fleet and the end of the sea battle: the Turks are withdrawing.²

These are his words:

Third Gent.: News, lords, your wars are done:
The desperate tempest hath so bang'd the Turk,
That their designment halts: another ship, of Venice,
Hath seen a grievous wreck and sufferance
On most part of the fleet.

Montano: How, is this true?

Third Gent.: The ship is here put in,
A Veronesa; Michael Cassio
Lieutenant to the warlike Moor Othello,
Is come ashore: the Moor himself at sea,
And is in full commission here for Cyprus. (20-29)

The mention of 'another' ship is criticised in Ridley for the reason that apparently no other ship has been mentioned before in the scene. Ridley also wonders why the ship being one 'of Venice' is called a 'Veronesa', from Verona, thus specifying its town of origin, whereas Verona is an inland city. He also says, 'of Venice must be punctuated so that it is a parenthesis' (p.48). But either with or without the two commas, the phrase does not change its meaning. 'Veronesa is an error for "Veronese" and is referred to Cassio' (p.48). But he forgets that in I.i.20 Shakespeare describes Cassio as 'a Florentine'.

Avoiding the difficulty, Honigmann keeps the variant in Q2 and F: 'a noble ship', and takes 'noble' as 'great, stately' (p.163). Not considering the language spoken in the Venetian Republic, he affirms that 'Veronessa (Qq) is simply wrong here, 'Veronese' being the right word (p.336).

All that criticism appears to be rather confused and imprecise, whereas Shakespeare had a very clear image of the situation he describes and knowledge of the Venetian language, as given below.

Another ship of Venice

In order to understand why the Third Gentleman speaks of 'another' ship, it is necessary to analyse the dramatic action.

Montano and the two Gentlemen are outside on the battlements, in wait. The Third Gentleman enters with 'News'. It is logical to infer

that he has got it from the scene of battle itself and that he has just landed, having been transported in a Venetian ship: he has witnessed the wrecking of the fleet and is now reporting the event. Cassio, he says, has not travelled with him: he has come in 'another ship' which has just dropped anchor. The rest of the Venetian fleet is approaching the island under the command of Othello. In saying 'of Venice' he means that it is a ship of the Republic.

Here, in specifying this, Shakespeare reveals that, fighting at Cyprus (1571), there were not only Venetian ships but also ships of other countries. In fact, the fleet of the League against the Turks was composed of galleys of the Church under the command of Captain General Marcantonio Colonna, and vessels of Philip II King of Spain commanded by Gian Andrea Doria.³

Therefore, the specification 'of Venice' is not incongruous.

From analysis of the passage we see that the use of 'another' is appropriate and in agreement with the dramatic action: in fact, it implies that two ships have just landed on Cyprus: one with the Third Gentleman and 'another' with Cassio on board.

Contrary to the critics' opinion, the meaning of the passage is clear.

A Veronesa

Having established that it is a Venetian ship, it remains to explain why Shakespeare called it a '*Veronessa*' or '*Veronesa*'.

Veronesa is not a word of the Italian language as it was spoken throughout the peninsula: it is one belonging to Venetian-Italian, that is, to one of the many Neo-Latin languages that have developed from Latin since early medieval times, and are still in use in the various regions of Italy (the Italian form was and is *Veronese*, singular feminine).

Shakespeare's use of 'a' and not 'the' with '*Veronesa*' makes it clear that the word is not the proper name of a ship: in fact, it is one of many. We must establish the connection between a ship called '*Veronesa*' and the city of Verona. Honigmann, without giving his source, says that Verona had ships at the battle of Lepanto (p.336) but that does not answer the question.

The explanation is found in history.

Since the 13th century Verona had been the most important port on the river Adige. It was known as 'the Gate to the North' owing to its busy commercial trading. Precious goods, imported from the East to Venice, were carried along the river as far as Verona, Bolzano and, by land, to the markets and fairs in Germany, Flanders and England.

The reverse happened to goods manufactured in the north of Europe: they followed the same route back as far as Verona and Venice.

The Venetian Government and the local authorities were aware of the strategic position of the city, therefore, after Verona became part of the Republic (1405), a shipyard in that area for building flat-bottomed ships suitable for navigation on rivers and canals, had to be planned.

No landing site in the city of Verona was a safe place for the purpose, for the reason that, in times of heavy rains and floods, the current of the river was so strong that it smashed and swept away anything on the banks.

Fourteen kilometres north-west of Verona there was, and is, the little town of Pescantina, where, in a small shipyard, boats used to be repaired. This appeared to be a safe place, so it was chosen as a suitable location for a larger shipyard.⁴

Various types of boat were built there: each type had a different name and use: some were suitable for the transport of passengers, some for navigation on the Adige, others on the Po, or for fishing. They were so skilfully constructed that they were admired as 'the ships of Pescantina'.

What is of great importance to the interpretation of the line in Shakespeare is that, owing to the nearness to the much more famous city of Verona, they were better known as *Veronese*.⁵

Commercial traffic on the Adige increased and was for many centuries the greatest economic resource for Verona. The *burchi*⁶ of Pescantina, about 35 metres in length, used for the transport of goods, sailed not only on the Adige but also in the Adriatic, all along the Italian coast as far as the ports of Puglia in the South.⁷

In emergency situations of war, the Senate of the Republic had the right to employ *Veronese burchi* and boatmen in order to transport troops, ammunition, gunpowder, weapons and food supplies.⁸ They were called '*navi di appoggio*', support or supply ships. They followed the war-galleys and travelled in convoy. Historically, the Venetian fleet at Cyprus comprised cargo vessels: they were certainly Veronese ships famous for their sturdiness, though also in the city of Venice there were private and state shipyards where flat-bottomed ships were built.⁹

As the Third Gentleman says, the ship that transported Cassio to Cyprus was a Veronesa, that is, a vessel used in time of war as a supply ship. In choosing the word *Veronesa*, Shakespeare re-

veals that he knows not only the name of the type of ship, but also its Venetian form. The reference is an exact detail that finds its origin in the past of the Venetian Republic. How Shaksper from Stratford acquired that knowledge is left to Stratfordians to substantiate. It is known that on his Italian journey Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, the favourite candidate for the authorship of Shakespeare's works, travelled on the Brenta: among the ships that transported travellers and goods on that canal there were also those of Verona.

N.M.

Notes

1. Veronessa Qq; Verennessa F; Veronesa, Ridley.
2. The description of the defeat of the Turkish fleet that Shakespeare gives here, corresponds to the fortuitous events that caused the dispersal and destruction of the Spanish Armada in 1588: which is evidence that Shakespeare revised the scene after that historical event. In *Othello* the circumstances of the defeat are the same as the ones that took place in the English Channel.
3. Colonna and Doria will also fight at the battle of Lepanto.
4. One of the first shipyards was constructed by the Cobelli family in the second half of the 15th century. They continued to build ships for about five centuries until the 1950s. See Coltro, pp.78-81.
5. Coltro, p.24.
6. The name of one of the types of ship.
7. Faccioli, p.59. Since the 12th century transport on the Adige and in the Adriatic was regulated by agreements between the lords of Verona and the Doge of Venice. See the *Statuti delle Corporazioni dei radaroli e dei burchieri* held in the *Archivio di Stato* of Venice and Verona.
8. Faccioli, p. 112, 121.
9. Flat-bottomed ships were not built in the Arsenal.

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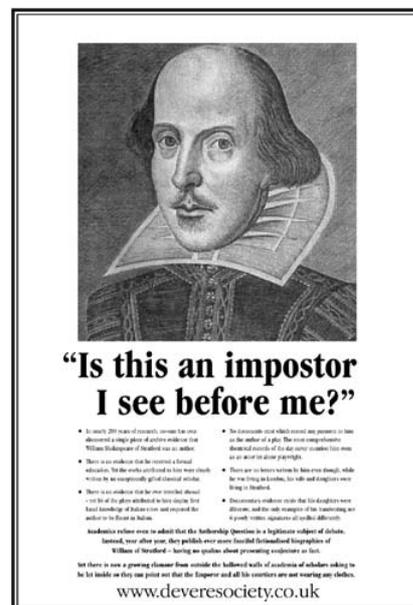
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