On Seeing the Venice Ghetto through the Eyes of Thomas Coryat

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Though they marvel at the Palazzi on the Grand Canal and admire Piazza San Marco, the Venice Ghetto as a physical space rarely figures in accounts by visitors. This notable absence begins with the first reports from the sixteenth century, when the Ghetto was established. Invented in Venice in 1516, the Ghetto takes its name from the abandoned foundry—*geto,* in Italian, from *gettare,* to cast, via the latin *iactare* —on the island to which the Jews were exiled by Venetian authorities.

Many of our conversations at the Frankel Institute's theme year on "Jews and the City" focused on the relation of space and place, and how physical conditions and neighborhood life connect. They led me to ask what observers so alert to the built environment of Venice noticed when they came to visit the Ghetto. In this brief first report on my research, I ask what we can learn from what these travelers dwelled on in their accounts. These early modern accounts shaped the Ghetto's cultural imprint, and also served later eras as a portal into its afterlife.

The dynamic experience of life in Venice and the Ghetto produces information overload: it makes no sense in terms of visitors' expectations. They read the dizzying exchanges and negotiations they register as a Babel of languages and encounters. John Evelyn, for example, notes in his Diary (1645–46) his surprise at the "strange variety" he met every day in the streets, which included Jews, Turks, Armenians, Persians, Moors, and Greeks, all wearing their "native fashions" (Ravid, 125–126).

For English visitors, meeting Jews was one of the "novelties of continental travel," since the Jews had been expelled from England in 1290. The synagogue beckons these Christian visitors. They visit, observe Jewish customs, listen to Hebrew prayers, and then attend to Italian sermons.

John Evelyn is fascinated by a Jewish marriage, and describes parts of the ceremony he witnesses, including breaking the glass. He is also surprised and delighted to see "at this ceremony" very "beautiful" Portuguese Jewish women, with whom he conversed (Ravid, 126).

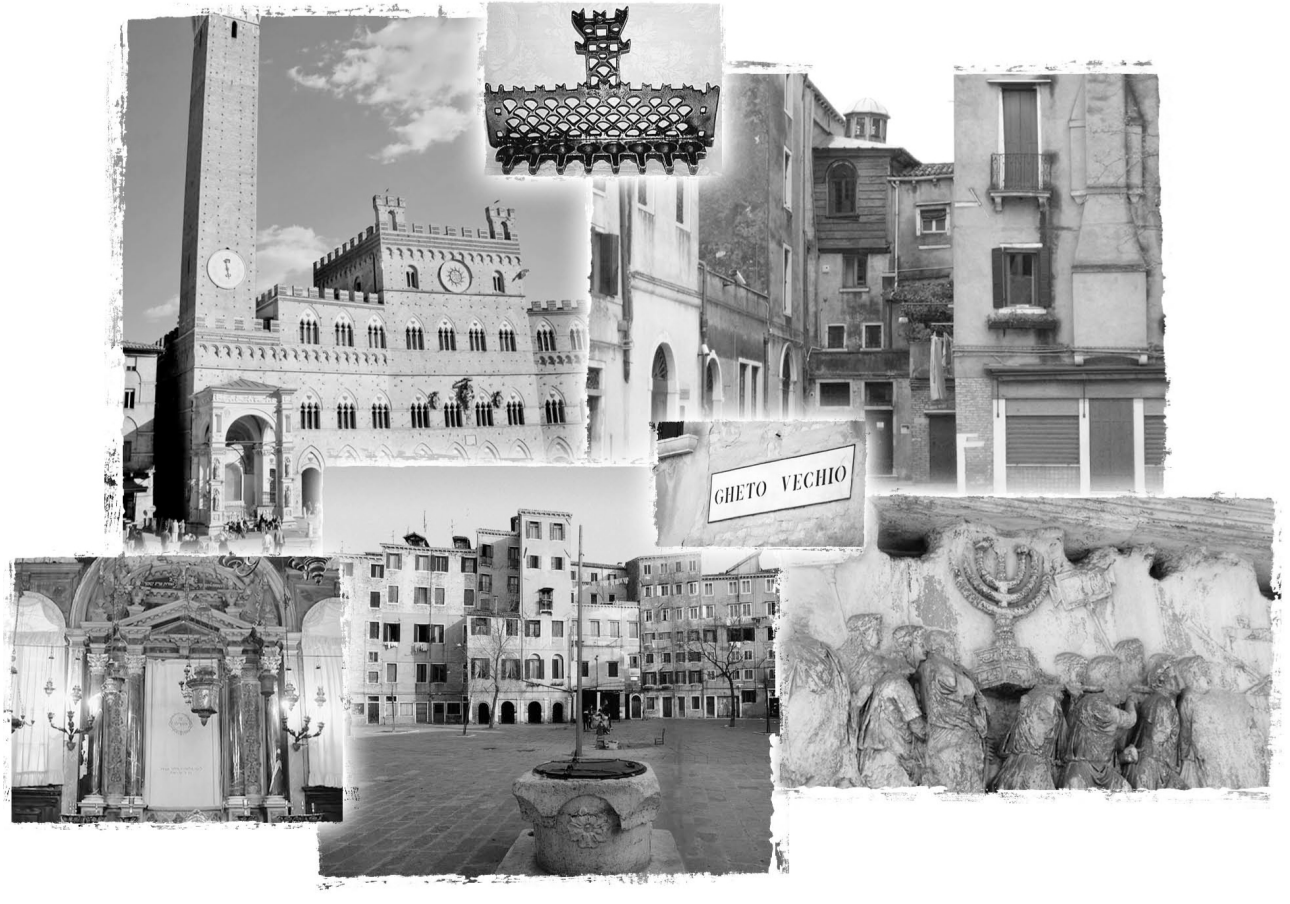
And Philip Skippon comments, as do other travelers, that "The *Jews* have their quarters in a part of the city where they are shut up every night.... In this place call'd the *Gheto,* they have a large piazza built about with houses seven and eight-stories high, three or four families living in a house. They have five or six synagogues" (Ravid, 127).

These travelers were responding as do contemporary visitors to the social and architectural differences between Venice and the Ghetto. Instead of the stability of classical architecture and the orderly and symmetrical parade of the facades of Renaissance *palazzi* on the Grand Canal, in the Ghetto there is architectural heterogeneity, variety, and social diversity. They observe the dynamic and unstable Jewish life experience in the Ghetto generated by conditions imposed by Venetian authorities.

Thomas Coryat, perhaps the most important of these travelers and a contemporary of Shakespeare's, wrote in 1611 about the Ghetto, "where the whole fraternity of the Jews" lived together. He records the visual identifying marks Venetian Jews are required to wear, especially when venturing outside the Ghetto. Here accounts of these travelers echo premodern visual representations of Jews, including the horned Moses of Renaissance sculpture and painting. Coryat is an accurate observer, and registers the great diversity among the Jews, noting that those from western countries wore a red head-covering while the Jews who come from the east—from Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Alexandria—wore turbans (Coryat, 231).

While Coryat comments in passing on the large numbers of Jews living in the Ghetto, he ignores the fact that Jews live in the tallest buildings in Venice. These are seven- and eight-story buildings, whereas even the grand Palazzi are only three or four stories high. But the island of the Ghetto was not well constructed, so these buildings listed, and had a helter-skelter look evident in our own time—by contrast with the regular features of Venetian architecture, which followed Renaissance architectural theory and practice. Nor does he comment on how, sequestered in this small space, the Jews subdivided their living quarters. Coryat notes, however, that the Jews have at least seven diverse synagogues, "where all of them, both men, women and children" meet each Sabbath, on Saturday (Coryat, 232). He thus acknowledges that in the Ghetto the Jews were divided into congregations generated by their communities of origin.

Coryat's account is clear and direct, visually striking, and detailed as part of his effort to be accurate, though the Jewish life he encounters in the Ghetto is outside his frame of reference. For him, as for other early modern travelers, the chance to see and meet Jews attracts and repels. For there were no Jews at that time in France or England, having been expelled. Like the Venetian legislators who established the Ghetto, Coryat and these visitors are engaged and even fascinated by the ethnographic curiosities of the space of this island between Canareggio and San Geremias. Ignoring its spatial configuration, they comment instead on the social relations and cultural experience they witness in the Ghetto. These travelers immediately remark in their accounts not where but how Jews live in the Ghetto: what Jews look like, what they wear, and what ceremonies take place in the synagogues form the center of their observations.


GHETO VECHIO

Even as he responds to its complexity, Coryat engages central Jewish stereotypes promulgated by the politics of isolation that generated the Ghetto. He focuses on the beauty of the Jewish women he sees in the synagogue. It is one of the surprises he encounters in the Ghetto. He notices that in the synagogues, the women sit in a separate loft. There he "saw many Jewish women," whom he thought "were as beautiful as ever" and comparable in their jewelry to some of the English Countesses with whom he was familiar (Coryat, 372).

Just as the separation of women from men makes it easier to focus on them and note their special features, so the separation of Jews from other Venetians by the Ghetto makes them particularly intriguing — and easier to fetishize. But when Coryat encounters some Levantine Jews, he has to consider and reject the stereotype of the Jew he has come with. He found them to be "such goodly and proper men," that he recognized that the proverb "to look like a Jew," meaning a "weather beaten warp-faced fellow," was false. He concluded that some Jews were "most elegant and sweet featured persons, which gave me occasion the more to lament their religion" (Coryat, 372).

The cognitive dissonance between expectation and actuality can only be resolved by turning to classical learning: "For if they were Christians, then could I better apply unto them that excellent verse of the Poet, than I can now. *Gratior est pulchro veniens e corpore virtus*." Quoting Aeneid 5:344, Coryat notes that "Virtue coming from a noble body is more pleasing" (Coryat, 372).

Coryat does not yield to the information overload that will beset other early visitors to the Ghetto. He senses that the Ghetto was not "just a refugee shelter," but was evolving into "an urban environment in which daily life was a rich tapestry woven from points of primary exchange and places of work" (Calabi, 39). Nevertheless, when like other early modern travelers he dwells on the beauty of the Jewish women, registering them as eminently desirable, he does not mention that Jews and prostitutes were required to wear the same yellow markings when venturing out of the Ghetto.

Coryat's careful account offers us the possibility of assessing the impact of the Ghetto as the emblematic place of modern exile for the Jewish people. While he engages the Jewish stereotypes generated by the Ghetto, he does not promulgate them as other writers will.

Works Cited

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