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Review: Shylock's Venice – An unimprovable book

A rigorous trawl through Venetian archives yields a work that begs for a lavish film adaptation

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Harry Freedman's latest work of popular history is alluringly titled *Shylock's Venice*, and only subtitled "The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto".

In fact, we get rather little of Shylock and a great deal more of the remarkable history, but the book is none the less fascinating for that.

Freedman has methodically trawled through the Venetian archives from the 15th to the 18th century, leading the reader through the arcane way in which the Venice republic was governed. Woven into his user-friendly guide to the behaviour of the lords of La Serenissima is a fascinating account of some of the leading personalities of the Jewish and Venetian community of those years.

We meet hucksters and priests, rabbis and merchants, cardinals, popes and poets. And most central of all to the development of the

ghetto, it seems to me, was not the crippling taxes imposed on its Jewish inhabitants, and the curb on their movements — but the nascent printing industry and the flood of books that came to define the thinking of the Jewish world.

Freedman argues persuasively that the Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries — in which Jews tentatively dipped a toe into the wider, secular world — was comprehensively established in Venice at least 200 years before.

He shows us a Venice in which Jews and Christians did not live as equals — the strictures of the ghetto put paid to that — but there were many instances of co-operation and exchange of knowledge between the two communities. It was not uncommon for Christian scholars to engage Jews — frequently versed in several languages — to work with them in translations of biblical texts. In turn for the gifts of Hebrew and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), the scholars offered Latin and Greek.

I must admit that I had always believed the legendary Venetian printer Daniel Bomberg to be Jewish — no doubt because of the 20th-century painter David Bomberg, a member of the Whitechapel school of artists. But Daniel Bomberg the printer was a Belgian Christian, who, as Freedman writes, “had recently [around 1517] obtained an exclusive, ten-year licence from the Venetian government to print Hebrew books”.

Bomberg began his enterprise with Friar Felice da Prato, “a converted Jew and son of a rabbi” on their first publication, an edition of the first Hebrew Bible with the major medieval rabbinic commentaries on the same page as the rabbinic text.

Converts, and the pressure to convert, bestride the pages of this occasionally heartbreaking book, in which at one point in the life of the ghetto — in October 1553 — there was a nationwide burning of the Talmud in the central squares, the result of an escalating printers' squabble that soon reached the ears of the Pope.

Rabbi Menahem Rapaport, a witness to this burning in St Mark's Square, wrote about it years later. He recalled: "The hand of God was against us when the decree went out from the city of Rome that [the Talmud] should be consumed by fire. In the city of Venice, woe to the eyes that saw this on the 13th and 14th of Marcheshvan 5314 [corresponding to October 31-November 1, 1553], a continual fire which was not extinguished."

Christians and Jews, says Freedman, used the opportunities of Venice and its reputation for trade and scholarship, sometimes to enrich each other and [around 1517] sometimes to turn things to their advantage.

A member of the former category was famously Henry VIII, who sought to find a biblical solution to end his marriage to Catherine of Aragon after the Pope had refused to grant him a divorce. Henry dispatched the English classical scholar Richard Croke, together with the Bishop of London, John Stokesley, to Venice, to find a compliant rabbinical opinion or a loophole.

Croke spoke to Rabbi Elijah Menahem Halfon, who said that since Catherine had been previously married to Henry's brother, Arthur, the biblical law requiring him to marry his brother's widow — Catherine — did not apply, since Henry was not a Jew. Thus, he proclaimed, the marriage was invalid. A furious Pope consulted his

own pet Jew and received entirely the opposite opinion, and inevitably, a diplomatic row ensued between Venice and England.

Almost 90 years after the royal convulsion, Freedman reminds us of another extraordinary scandal — this time relating to a young and well-off Jewish woman, Sara Copia Sulam, and her correspondence with a Genoese monk, Ansaldo Cebà. In 1618 she had launched a literary salon — but the exchange of letters, which she had begun in admiration for Cebà's work, turned sour. Christians who had begun attending her salon attacked and robbed her, and, eventually, after another theological dispute, Sara closed her salon in 1624.

As for Shylock, he flits mysteriously in and out of the pages as Freedman — aided by the voices of various Shakespeare scholars — speculates as to how much the playwright knew of the intricacies of the Venice ghetto.

Frankly, I could have devoured this work without Shylock's presence. So much of this material seems to beg for a lavish film adaptation as there are deaths, ducats, rebel rabbis, ghettos and gondolas. Unimprovable.

Shylock's Venice *by Harry Freedman, Bloomsbury, £20*